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An Early American Family of Flutists

by Wendell Dobbs



English emigrant Edward R. Riley and a dynasty of flute makers, performers, and publishers contributed to the thriving musical environment of a young United States.

In 1805, Thomas Jefferson began his second presidential term after a landslide reelection victory that had followed the 1803 completion of his presidency's crowning achievement, the Louisiana Purchase. By 1805, William Clark and Meriwether Lewis reached the furthest extent of their monumental expedition, wintering at Fort Clatsop. That year, too, international tensions with both England and France were building. And in 1805, against this historical backdrop, Edward R. Riley (1769–1829), a flutist and music engraver from London, immigrated to New York and began a dynasty of flutists, flute manufacturers, and music publishers that extended into the 1860s.

A Teacher of Piano Forte, Etc.

Riley had engraved and published music in London from 1795 to 1803. After coming to America, he advertised himself as a “teacher of piano forte, singing, etc.” in the *New York Evening Post* on October 20, 1806, and as “teacher of German flute, patent flageolet [sic], piano and singing” on January 5, 1807.¹ For several years he taught music and worked as an engraver for John Paff² and John Appel,³ but in 1811 he established his own business as a music publisher and engraver at 17 Chatham Street.⁴ The following year he joined with copperplate printer Thomas Adams to form Riley & Adams,⁵ opening a music store at 23 Chatham Street.⁶ By 1819 he also operated out of 29 Chatham Street, the address stamped on many E. Riley flutes and musical editions. According to Wolfe, Riley restricted his role in the music publishing business to the pewter plate engraving part of the process. He then sent the plates to Adams for the transfer to copperplate and printing.⁷ By specializing in this way, Riley was able to pursue other facets of his professional life—teaching, performing, retailing, and perhaps manufacturing musical instruments.

As a music publisher, Riley was aided by up-to-date tools and methods brought from England, and an embargo on English imports from 1807 through the War of 1812 boosted Riley's success as a musical instrument retailer. When trade resumed in 1816, Riley—and many other American fledgling manufacturers—benefitted from a stiff tariff of 30 percent imposed on woodwind instruments,⁸ and established a thriving market for his flutes, fifes, and flageolets.⁹

Though Nancy Groce in her *Musical Instrument Makers of New York* speculates whether Riley actually made the instruments he sold, numerous instruments, especially flutes, are stamped with his mark.¹⁰ Several manufacturers in the immediate area could have supplied instruments for Riley's retail, among them George Catlin in Hartford, Connecticut, and later in Philadelphia,¹¹ John and Horace Meacham in Albany (John served as an apprentice with Catlin),¹² or, later, Whiteley in Utica or Graves in New Hampshire.

Whoever produced them, the early E. Riley flutes were typically simple system flutes with six holes and one brass key (D sharp) and were constructed of boxwood in four joints. Usually, a distinctive, acute bulge is located on the socket of the headjoint and right-hand joint.

Extended Family Business

Edward and his wife Elizabeth had three sons and two daughters. All three sons followed in their father's footsteps as music publishers, music instrument manufacturers, and retailers, working, at some point, at the 29 Chatham Street location; two of them, Frederick and Henry, later opened shops nearby.¹³ After 1842, it is possible that Henry returned to the family's homeland and headed the shop Henry Riley & Sons in Birmingham, England, 1851–90.¹⁴ Edward C. appears to have had the most active life as a musician. After his father's death in 1829, he continued with his mother the 29 Chatham Street business from 1832 through 1842, when Frederick took over. He is listed as early as 1821 as a flute performer and conductor. He led an orchestra that accompanied the New York Choral Society in 1824, and was mentioned as “assistant” to the New York Philharmonic Society during its seventh season, 1848–49.¹⁵

Riley's daughter Sarah E. married John Firth.¹⁶ The other daughter (name unknown), married William Hall. Both Firth and Hall became prominent manufacturers and publishers in New York. Firth emigrated from Yorkshire, England, in 1810. He served in the United States military with future brother-in-law William Hall during the War of 1812. After the war, both found work in Riley's shop. William Hall had apprenticed in Albany, New York, possibly with musical instrument makers John and Horace Meacham.¹⁷ Both eventually left Riley's shop, Firth in 1815 and Hall in 1820, and joined to form Firth & Hall in 1821. They opened their music store at 358 Pearl Street, but moved in 1832 to 1 Franklin Square, the building distinguished as the first presidential mansion later known as “Washington House.”

Most notable among their published works for flute was Charles Nicholson's last method, *Nicholson's School for Flute* in 1831.¹⁸ They also published around the same time a set of variations by Nicholson on an air from the ballet from Paisiello's opera *Nina*. The title page recounts Cuddy's success when he performed the work at the New York Musical Fund Concert and that Nicholson's manuscript was in the possession of the publishers.¹⁹ Soon after, Firth and Hall joined with Sylvanus Pond to form Firth, Hall & Pond.²⁰ During the 1840s the company was highly successful in music publishing, retailing, and manufacture of musical instruments.²¹

Left: The street to the right-hand side of City Hall Park and fountain is Park Row, originally Chatham Street. The second building to the right of the Presbyterian Church steeple is #29 (with smoke emerging from the chimney), the location of Edward Riley's shop.

As with the flutes sold by Riley, those from Firth, Hall & Pond were simple system flutes. They usually had four to eight keys. Many were made of boxwood, though some were made of exotic hardwoods—cocus, rosewood, etc. Many of the instruments have the large tone hole design of English flutes of the era such as Clementi, Monzani, or Rudall & Rose instruments, though many surviving examples have more moderate-sized holes more similar to the more common Rudall & Rose design.

As with the E. Riley flutes, it is questionable whether the company actually manufactured the instruments or simply stamped the company name on instruments produced by others. For instance, in 1834, Firth, Hall & Pond entered into an arrangement with the Litchfield, Connecticut, woodwind-making firm run by Asa Hopkins and Camp, selling their instruments in the New York store.²² In 1845 they acquired the company outright. Firth, Hall & Pond continued until 1847, when William Hall left to form his own company with his son. The remaining Firth & Pond (most notably an important publisher of Stephen Foster) then brought into the business their sons—Thaddeus and Edward J. Firth and William Pond—and, following the popular and lucrative trend of the day, turned their attention particularly to the retailing and manufacture of pianofortes, though there are some excellent examples of elegant Firth & Pond flutes.²³

William Hall & Son (James T. Hall) started their business on Wooster Street, but moved after 1850 to several different locations on Broadway. They manufactured excellent flutes in the simple system style with as many as eight keys.²⁴ However, as in the case of John Firth and Sylvanus Pond, they soon turned to pianoforte manufacture.²⁵ James T. Hall joined the federal army, and William—or General Hall, as he was called—retired from the business.

Publishing in Early America

Music publishing was a busy industry in the U.S. of the late 18th and early 19th centuries—particularly in Philadelphia. The city was the home of the oldest music publisher, George Willig, who was born in Germany and took over the business started in 1793 by Moller and Capron. Benjamin Carr was the best-known member of a family of English immigrants, several of whom became publishers of music. His father, Joseph, and brother, Thomas, opened a store in Baltimore while Benjamin established himself in Philadelphia and became the most prolific publisher of music in the 1790s.

Other Philadelphia publishers were Allyn Bacon, who established his business there in 1814 and was later joined by his brother George, and John G. Klemm, who ran his business from 1818 until 1880. George Blake, as did Riley, came to Philadelphia from England and first taught flute and clarinet. Blake's music publishing activities dated from 1803 and continued until 1851.

In Boston, the Ebenezer Batelle's Boston Book Store went through a series of hands—Guild, Pelham, Blagrove, and Samuel H. Parker—until it finally became the Oliver Ditson Company in the 1840s. The business eventually absorbed the catalogs of Firth & Pond, William Hall, and many others.

In New York, violinist George Gilfert maintained his *Musical*

Magazine until 1814. John Paff and John Appel, both early employers of Edward Riley, maintained businesses until 1817 and 1815 respectively. Violinist James Hewitt, another English immigrant, bought out Benjamin Carr's New York branch in 1797 but went out of business in 1811. His son, James L. Hewitt, was a Boston publisher (1825–29) and opened a New York store in 1830. John and Adam Geib established a music store in 1816 and published music until the 1840s.²⁶

Riley's Flute Melodies

In this vibrant music publishing environment, Riley was extraordinarily successful as a major publisher of a wide variety of sheet music. Online, 182 examples of Riley editions can be viewed at the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music at Johns Hopkins University,²⁷ and a 16-page catalog with a one-page supplement compiled by Riley himself in 1829 (the year of his death) is conserved at the New York Public Library and attests to the breadth of his work.²⁸

Mostly, Riley published editions of popular songs. For instance, he published the first “All American” 1825 hit song, John Hill Hewitt's “The Minstrel's Return'd from the War.” According to Hewitt's brother James Lang Hewitt, who belatedly published the song in 1827, his failure to copyright the song cost him \$10,000,²⁹ suggesting that Riley's business acumen may have occasionally been opportunistic.

Other than popular songs, Riley published instrumental music, mostly piano arrangements of dance music (sets of cotillions), marches, waltzes, and—naturally—flute music. Among Riley's patrons was U.S. Army officer, flutist, and collector of flute music Ethan Allen Hitchcock, who possessed several publications either published by E. Riley or stamped with the E. Riley retail mark. One of these was Alexander Kyle's arrangement for two flutes of popular airs from Auber's opera *Masaniello*. Kyle was a flutist and music teacher at the Military Academy at West Point at the same time Hitchcock was assigned there, and later made his career in New York serving in the fledgling New York Philharmonic.³⁰ Soon after establishing his business, Riley published a method entitled *Riley's New Instructions for the German Flute* (1811)³¹ and a four-volume collection of *Riley's Flute Melodies*.

The first two volumes of this extraordinary collection of popular music in early 19th-century America were published in serial form in 1814 and 1817 and together in 1820.³² Third and fourth volumes were published in the early and mid 1820s.³³ Riley's collections contain all manner of music—English, Irish, and Scottish folk melodies (dances and slow airs), tunes from theater productions, French popular tunes, melodies by Classical masters Mozart and Haydn, and American melodies—close to 1,300 melodies without accompaniment, arranged in no particular order, though there is an index at the back of each volume.

The issue of copyright is interesting in the case of *Riley's Flute Melodies*. According to Hitchcock, Riley applied for copyrights for his 1814 and 1817 volumes. However, many American melodies—easily identified since they have some sort of American significance such as “The Celebration March on the Peace of 1815,” “President Monroe's Hornpipe,” “President Munros [sic] March,” or “The President's Welcome



The fourth flute from the bottom is an E. Riley; the third is a Firth & Pond, and the second is a Rudall & Rose. Notice the distinctive bulge on the headjoint of the E. Riley, the elegant craftsmanship of the Firth & Pond, and its similarity to the Rudall & Rose.

to York”—are often individually labeled as copy-right [sic] and list no composer. One can only assume that Riley was either the composer of some or all of these individually copyrighted melodies and was trying to protect his own work and economic interest, or that he was affording a minimum of respect for the intellectual property of others.

One can safely assume that Riley is indeed the composer of number 301 in volume two, “Polonaise,” that is copyrighted with the initials “E. R.” Similarly, his son is surely the composer of number 239 in the same volume, “Mrs. Magillicuddy,” which is copyrighted with the initials “E.C.R.” In volume four “E.C. Riley” appears as the composer of the copyrighted “Beware the Fair Fisher.” Tellingly, volume four also includes an abbreviated version of Hewitt’s hit “The Minstrel’s Return’d from the War,” and Riley makes reference to neither copyright nor composer. Melodies in the collection by European masters never include any individual copyright reference, though the composer’s name is often included.³⁴

As for the European music, the first two volumes include Celtic melodies still current today. “The Priest in his Boots,” “The Mason’s Apron,” and “Haste to the Wedding” are still favorites among Irish fiddlers and fluters. English folk tunes include the Masonic “Anacreon in Heaven,” whose melody had recently been applied to Francis Scott Key’s “Star Spangled Banner.”

Theatrical Works

From the European theater, volume one contains seven melodies from John O’Keefe and William Shields’s 1783 popular comic opera *Poor Soldier*. Based on melodies by Turlough O’Carolan, the 18th-century, blind, itinerant, Irish harper, *Poor Soldier* had experienced enormous success in the late 1780s in Dublin, London, and New York, and had become standard fare on the Eastern seaboard of the United States and as far west as Cincinnati by 1801.³⁵

More representation from the theater is found in volumes three and four. The “Hunter’s Chorus” and the “Bridesmaid’s Chorus” are among the selections from von Weber’s *Der Freischütz* in volume three. Rossini’s *Cinderella* is represented in volume four. Many transcriptions of theater songs in the collection show the dialogue between the vocal and accompaniment parts by including the cues “sym” for symphony or accompanying melodic parts and “song” for the solo vocal parts.

Of particular interest to flutists are several melodies that include sets of variations, embellished versions of songs, and/or cadenzas permitting a glimpse into the interpretive and technical styles of flutists of the day. Volume one contains the traditional tune “Sally in Our Alley” with a variation and Charles Nicholson’s version of “Coolun” replete with his typical pervasive embellishment, though missing two of Nicholson’s favorite mannerisms—the glide and finger vibrato.³⁶ Volume two includes an extended version of Philipps’ “Cupid, God of Soft Persuasion” and “O Ponder Well,” both with involved, embellished passages that feature gruppetti, scalar passages, scales in thirds, dotted rhythms, and brief cadenzas.

Made in America

In conclusion, flutists generally know of their heritage of 18th-century greats—Blavet, Devienne, and Quantz, to mention only a few. In America, flutists usually know of 20th-century orchestral stars and their evolution from French immigrant flutists. But the American flute heritage extends back to the early years of our nation’s history. Edward Riley and his family of flutists, flute manufacturers/retailers, and music publishers made significant contributions to the history and evolution of music in America.

Where the flute was concerned, Riley was far from the first practitioner in America. The previous generation produced numerous flutists. Some, such as John Hiwell, General

Washington's Continental Army Music Inspector, were Revolutionary War fifers. After the war, Hiwell opened a music school first in Providence, Rhode Island, and then in Savannah, Georgia.³⁷ In similar fashion, John McLane was the fife major of the 29th regiment and after the war an instructor of the German flute in Philadelphia.³⁸ William Brown emigrated from England and organized benefit concerts, particularly in Philadelphia toward the end of the Revolutionary War; in 1785, he founded the New York Subscription Concerts,³⁹ and in 1787, dedicated three Rondos to Francis Hopkinson.⁴⁰ English emigrant William Young performed in 1788 on a similar series with violinist and publisher James Hewitt.⁴¹

In the broader sense, Edward Riley was a musician and craftsman who, at middle age, uprooted his family from London and become part of the grand American experiment. He brought with him a wealth of musical knowledge and skill. He founded a business, benefited from a positive business climate, was active as a musician mixing his personal musical catalog from England with music created and gathered in his new home, fostered a succeeding generation of musicians, manufacturers, and publishers, and became part of the musical melting pot of styles and repertoire in the young United States. *

Wendell Dobbs is professor of flute at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. He produced the CD Rallying Round Our Liberty with guitarist Leo Welch and soprano Linda Dobbs, featuring selections from Riley's Flute Melodies, among other works from the era. That recording and this article were prepared thanks to release time granted by the John Deaver Drinko Academy at Marshall University.

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ENDNOTES

- Richard J. Wolfe, *Secular Music in America 1801–1825, Vol. II* (New York: New York Public Library, 1964), 735.
- See "The Home of My Heart," by E. Phelps as an example of Riley's engraving in the Paff shop, Lester S. Levy Collection, levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu, Call No. Box: 109, Item: 158.
- See "Allen A Dale," by C. Gilfert, as an example of Riley's engraving for J. Appel, Lester S. Levy Collection, levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu, Call No. Box: 065, Item: 001
- Robert E. Eliason, "Riley, Edward," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1986), 47-8.
- Nancy Groce, "Riley, Edward, Sr.," *Musical Instrument Makers in New York* (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1991), 131.
- Chatham Street was later renamed Park Row which formed one of the boundaries, the other being Broadway, of the then newly-developed City Hall Park. Construction of the south-facing New York City Hall was begun in 1803 and was completed in 1812. Though Park Row still exists, the block across from City Hall has been redeveloped at least twice and currently is occupied by high rise buildings. Pace University is nearby.
- Richard J. Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing*, (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 72.
- Robert E. Eliason, *Graves and Company Musical Instrument Makers* (Dearborn, Mich.: Greenfield Village & Henry Ford Museum, 1975), 2.
- Flageolets were recorder-like instruments or "duct" flutes that were very popular in France and England throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th century. There were double flageolets with two pipes usually tuned a third apart (see a E. Riley, Sr. double flageolet in the Dayton C. Miller Collection, DCM 0045, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dcmhtml/dmhome.html>) or even triple flageolets sometimes with drones.
- Two are in the Dayton C. Miller Collection, DCM 0392 and 0377. Currently, it is impossible to establish whether Edward Riley made flutes or was just a retailer. The fact that Firth and Hall both came to work in the shop, in the case of Hall, after an apprenticeship (most likely with John Meacham), and the fact that it is generally believed that the flutes later sold by Firth & Hall were of their own production, leads to the conclusion that the flutes were made at some point in Edward Riley's shop.
- Robert E. Eliason, "George Catlin, Hartford Musical Instrument Maker, Parts 1 and 2," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, Vol. 8 (1982), 16-37 and Vol. 9 (1983), 21-43
- Robert E. Eliason, "The Meachams, Musical Instrument Makers of Hartford and Albany," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, Vol. 5/6 (1979/80), 54; or Phillip T. Young, "Meacham," *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, Vol. 2, 630.
- Presumably, instruments stamped "F. Riley" were from Frederick's shop at 297 Broadway, across City Hall Park from 29 Chatham Street.
- Groce, 131-32.
- Henry Edward Krehbiel, *The Philharmonic Society of New York*, A memorial published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Philharmonic Society, April 1892, by the society (New York & London: Novello, Ewer & Co., 1892), 165. Wolfe, 736.
- U.S. Census Records, Newtown, Queens, New York, 1850, 1860.
- It is reasonable to conclude that William Hall was the only flute maker among the Rileys and John Firth since he is the only one apprenticed as an instrument maker and since later he left Firth, Hall and Pond to make his own flutes at about the same time that Firth and Pond absorbed Asa Hopkins's Litchfield, Connecticut, business.
- Other Firth & Hall publications for flute can be found in the Ethan Allen Hitchcock collection in the Warren D. Allen Music Library in the School of Music Library at Florida State University. See HC 17, No. 6; HC 29, No. 15; HC 30, 15, and 16; and HC 253, No. 9. HC 214, No. 1 is a Firth & Pond publication.
- The Ethan Allen Hitchcock collection of flute music (Warren D. Allen Music Library, Florida State University) HC 17, No. 6 and HC 16, No. 9. Edward Cuddy, an English transplant, may have transported the work to America. The complete text of the title page is "A Celebrated AIR from the Ballet of Nina Arranged with Variations for the FLUTE with an (ad lib.) Accompaniment for the Piano Forte by Nicholson and performed with the most unbounded applause at the New York Musical Fund Concert by Mr. Cuddy, and by him Dedicated to Pierce Butler, Esq. Philadelphia. NB. This Piece is now Published for the first time from Mr. Nicholson's original Manuscript in the possession of the Publishers. Firth & Hall, 358, Pearl Street, New York."
- F.O. Jones, "Pond, William A. & Co.," *A Handbook of American Music and Musicians* (Canaserage: F.O. Jones, 1886; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 138.
- Groce, 52.
- There are a dozen examples of Firth, Hall & Pond instruments in the Dayton C. Miller Collection at the Library of Congress.
- Nancy Groce in *Musical Instrument Makers in New York* cited above, Decline of the Trade, p. xiv cites several sources that underscore how widespread the manufacture of pianofortes had become by 1861, "the capital invested in the manufacture of pianofortes alone in the United States is fully equal to that employed in the manufacture of cotton goods." (*American Music Directory* 1861: xiv)
- Dayton C. Miller 0780 is an excellent example with silver ferrules and an engraved silver embouchure plate.
- William Waterhouse, "Hall, William & Son," *The New Langwill Index* (London: Tony Bingham, 1993), 158.
- William Arms Fisher, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Music Publishing in the United States* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1933) 2-97.
- levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu.
- Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing*, 227.
- Harry Dichter and Elliott Shapiro, *Handbook of Early American Sheet Music 1768-1889* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), xxvii.
- John Erskine, *The Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York Its First Hundred Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 2-12. Kyle's collection is conserved at the Warren D. Allen Music Library, Florida State University, see HC 25, Nos. 4; HC 26, No. 4 and HC 26 No. 5 are first and second flute parts of Kyle's Auber arrangement.
- A description of New Instructions is listed in Wolfe, *Secular Music*, 744; a copy exists at the Library of Congress.
- Edward Riley, *Riley's Flute Melodies*, Vol. I, II (New York: E. Riley, 1814-16, 1817-20; facsimile reprint, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock, Da Capo Press, 1973), Introduction.
- The 1973 reprint of volumes one and two has gone out of print. Original copies of all four volumes exist at the New York Public Library Performing Arts Branch at Lincoln Center.
- Respect by American publishers for international copyright was lacking from colonial times through most of the 19th century. Charles Dickens and William Wordsworth both complained bitterly about American piracy of their works. The issue was not resolved until the passage of the Chase Act in 1891.
- John O'Keefe and William Shield, *Poor Richard*, with a preface by William Brasmer and William Osborne (Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 1978), vii, viii.
- Flutist Charles Nicholson (1795-1837) was a very prominent performer in London. The Irish folk tune "Coolun" (also spelled coolin, Gaelic for the fair-haired one—an Chúillíonn) is featured in *Beauties and School for Flute*. Typical of Nicholson's flute music, this version is in F major; one of the few melodies in a flat key in Riley's collection. Nicholson's music usually favored flat keys.
- Warren P. Howe, "Early American Military Music," *American Music*, 17:1 (Spring 1999), p. 87-116.
- O.G. Sonneck, *Early Concert Life in America (1731-1800)* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907; facsimile reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 175.
- ibid.*, 185.
- Oscar G. T. Sonneck, Francis Hopkinson (Washington, 1905; facsimile reprint New York: Da Capo, 1969), 58.
- Sonneck, *Early Concert Life in America*, 191.