

Dan Gediman: This is the Reckoning, I'm Dan Gediman.
If you live in Kentucky, there is a song that is part of the sonic landscape of the state.

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The song is Stephen Foster's My Old Kentucky Home. Published in 1853, it's been Kentucky's state song since 1928. And it's hard to avoid if you live here. They sing it at school assemblies:

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At University of Kentucky basketball games:

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It's used in all sorts of commercials, selling everything from fried chicken, to bourbon, to solar power.

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And, of course, every year it is sung before the running of the Kentucky Derby

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It is a song with a complicated history. And it has an odd relationship with Kentucky, and its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, that has only recently been reckoned with.

Emily Bingham: I think of it as a sonic monument to a segregated memory.
And I think it's very important to understand how it became that.

Dan Gediman: Emily Bingham is a writer from Louisville who has written a book about the song which will be published in early 2022. It's called *Singing About Slavery: "My Old Kentucky Home"*. I interviewed her in 2019, before the BLM protests of 2020 inspired greater scrutiny of the song and its meaning. This led some to call for its abandonment as the state song, and for Churchill Downs to stop playing it before the Derby. I began our conversation by asking her how she perceived the song growing up in Kentucky.

Emily Bingham: I was a horse crazy girl. And so Derby Day was always a really happy and exciting moment for me. And so as a result, that Pinnacle

moment where the energy and the anticipation reach their apex, and the horses step on the track, and that song played, I think, you know, I certainly would have had very happy associations with that, given the, you know, the crowd roars and you know, the first notes of, you know, a really beautiful melody, strike up. So I think I just would have thought it's a nice song about maybe Kentucky.

Dan Gediman: And when did you start to have any other thoughts or awareness of it?

Emily Bingham: Well, the next thing I recall, is reading *Gone with the Wind*, which I undertook to do I think I was 12 or 13. And I recall coming to a passage where it's toward the latter part of the book, and Atlanta is under siege. And Scarlet and Rhett, are in the parlor of Aunt Pitty Pat's house in Atlanta. And everybody is very gloomy, but they sit down at the piano and they play my old Kentucky home together and sing it as a duet. And Margaret Mitchell printed in the book, some verses that I'd never seen, and it's not the entire song at all, but its verses about. 'just a few more days, for to tote the weary load, no matter will never be light, just a few more days till we totter in the road, then our old Kentucky home Good night.'

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Emily Bingham: And it went straight to my mind that this was a civil war song. That's why they were singing it because it was about the Confederates that they, you know, were thinking of, in defeat, making their way back. And I think the images in the movie have stuff merged in my brain, but of these straggling tattered men hungry and defeated. So that's then I just kept that I think, for a long time that it must be really about the end of the war and people feeling sad.

Dan Gediman: And then what is the next progression of your awareness?

Emily Bingham: So the next progression really didn't come until adulthood. I had moved back to Kentucky in the mid 90s. I had been studying American history at Chapel Hill in graduate school. And I was finished with all my courses and starting to have my family and writing my dissertation. And at the time, my husband and I started to host friends for Derby. And I recall wanting to inform my friends about Derby and about Kentucky's traditions. And one of the main things that I was excited to share with them was Hunter Thompson's essay about the Kentucky Derby being decadent and depraved, which a lot of people didn't know that and thought was really funny. And we used to read it on the way to the track

But then I thought, you know, and then there's a song that we all have this emotion about, and maybe, you know, I should tell them about that. So I looked up the Full lyrics. And I just was really surprised. I was, I, you know, I have to say, I remembered kind of that there had been a scandalous word in the first verse, you know, in the original song, and that people weren't supposed to say that anymore. I kind of have a vague memory of that from childhood, but the song, when I read it carefully through I realized that this wasn't a song about the Civil War. It wasn't a song about really a Kentucky home so much as it was a song about a slave being sold a way down river to die in the sugarcane fields and also that it had been written in 1853. Like, I didn't know that either. So it was well before the Civil War couldn't have had anything to do with that directly. So it just kind of filed into my head that there was something strange about this song. I will say, though, that for years and years and years after that, I continued to sing the song and have the kind of emotions that I think a lot of people who look like me have when it comes on.

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Dan Gediman: My Old Kentucky Home is just one of dozens of popular songs written by the Pittsburgh-born songwriter Stephen Foster. At the height of his career in the 1850s, he cranked out hit songs, many of them for use in the blackface minstrel shows of the day--songs like "Oh! Susanna", "Camptown Races", and "Swanee River." But there is some evidence that by the time he wrote My Old Kentucky Home he had become interested in abolitionism through the influence of a close friend in the movement.

Emily Bingham: Stephen Foster had a draft of this song that was in a notebook that he kept. And the draft has a completely different title. Though, the song The melody is almost what we have today. And so there are parts of the song that are the same but the chorus is old, Uncle Tom, good night, you've gone to a better land old Uncle Tom, something along those lines. And this kind of made all the chips fall into place to understand that he was almost certainly inspired by the publication in 1851 and 2 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin in which a slave from Kentucky is a faithful slave is sold downriver for his masters debts to Louisiana, and at first lives kind of in certain amount of comfort,-as a domestic slave in the household of a rich man, but then when times change again, he is put out to plantation and works in the sugarcane field and is brutally treated and dies at the hands of, of a brutal sort of overseer. Right. So that's the story of Uncle Tom. And it just very nicely, tracks the basic outline of

the song we know today as my old Kentucky home, except that at some point along the line, the author Foster, who was extremely sensitive to his times, and very careful about what he you know, what he published, he, he decided to take Uncle Tom out of it, and make it a more generic song, less associated with one thing, and certainly less associated with anti-slavery as a result, but which was incredibly controversial at the time, and might not have won him as many fans. But he also added this thing about weep no more, my lady, and you know, we'll go to our Kentucky home far away a sort of a wishful comforting, almost like a lullaby.

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Emily Bingham: My conclusion is that the anti-slavery content or association of the first draft was too hot. And it was not smart for him to probably put that in a song that way. There were plenty of Uncle Tom songs going out on in that period, people were composing songs, relating to the story, but he chose not to, and I think, you know, what does that say? I, I think he was thinking about his bottom line, which he really needed to do, he was not making a lot of money. So I guess what I would say is that he was aware of the controversy. And either he or someone persuaded himself that it was a better idea to be more neutral, I guess, in a very heated political controversy.

Dan Gediman: It's hard to overestimate how popular and influential Uncle Tom's Cabin was in the 1850s, given how few people read it today. It was truly a blockbuster in terms of book sales, and it was also important as a kind of consciousness-raising tool, especially in the north, about the evils of slavery. But it also had a long-lasting second life as the raw material for all sorts of theatrical productions, which often used My Old Kentucky Home as part of the musical score.

Emily Bingham: And then I think my big point, for me, in this project about Uncle Tom's Cabin is that, like many people in the 20th century, we, you know, haven't read the book, but a lot of people in the 19th century did, but a lot of people didn't, what they did is they saw shows, and plays, it became the most produced theatrical, piece in America, America for the whole half century or more after its publication. So every summer if you lived in, I don't know, Dayton, Ohio, there would come through town, a Uncle Tom's Cabin tent show, where the story would be replayed on a stage with often lot of great special effects and greyhounds and things like that to, to evoke the drama and melodrama. And that is how more Americans over the years ingested the story.-And there was a anti-

slavery cast to many of those productions, but there was also a lot of plain flat out humor and making fun of the characters.

And my old Kentucky home as a song was played in many of these productions, including ones that were overtly, like literally overtly pro slavery. So some productions were like, Yeah, come laugh at Uncle Tom and all those people. And you would hear My Old Kentucky Home sung in that context, as well. So it's, it's really complicated, between, you know, a sincere anti-slavery message, and the way that it was experienced by a people who I think we have to acknowledge many Americans were not, they may not have liked the idea of slavery, or especially the extension of slavery into new territories, which is really what the conflict was about, fundamentally. But they weren't particularly comfortable with the idea of racial equality. And, in fact, most of them were very uncomfortable with that idea. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that there was a lot of fun being made, and a lot of minstrelsy, attached directly to a book that we think of as a manifesto for anti-slavery.

Dan Gediman: So I want to back up. We started by talking about how my old Kentucky home is indelibly connected to the Kentucky Derby that, you know, people all over the world who watch the Kentucky Derby have this archetypal moment, every year, where everybody pauses, and they sing my old Kentucky home. So let's talk a little bit about the Derby for a second, because it is this this signature event that we have here. It's tied to my old Kentucky home, and may have other connections to what we're talking about. So what is your understanding of sort of the origins of the Kentucky Derby as sort of something more than a horse race?

Emily Bingham: That's a good question. My research reaches pretty directly to the figure of a man named Matt Wynn. Matt Wynn was the director, I believe, of Churchill Downs. In the 1920s and 30s. And he was a amazing promoter, really. So he, the track almost went under. And he was part of a group of people who, who sort of saved it, so he went on to try to figure out well how to make, you know, this track profitable and horse racing was, you know, kind of in its heyday. And there were a lot of problems at other tracks, also, apparently with, I guess, corruption. And he saw an opportunity to create an aura, an event a brand around the derby, that had to do with some of what we've been talking about with a tradition. A Southern I mean, you know, you can't, you know, they're all these plays and songs, and, you know, even movies at this point about the Old South and how things were. And so I think he saw that people were hungry for that,

there was a real market for that. So he said, You can come you and all your friends, bring your friends dress up, come, we're gonna have special trains coming from the big cities, for this for this big race. You know, you can come Put your foot in the south, you don't have to come that far. It's sort of a safe and pleasant way to experience this, this traditions of hospitality and color. We're going to have mint juleps which have an association for sure with the Old South, the Kentucky Colonel on his front porch being, you know, served mint juleps by a black slave or servant, in a white coat with, you know, branch water. All that. And, we can deliver a sort of trip into the past, for a weekend or even just a night.

So you see, it began to be promoted as a southern experience. And this is also the time when, you know, tourism is beginning to, you know, rise, and certainly train travel had gotten very good. And people could get places easily. And it, it really worked. He was he was a master. And he also spent, a lot of time, sort of lobbying, he would set up shop in New York City for months at a time live in a hotel and have lunch every day with some sportswriter or some, I don't know, some opinion maker and, and just, you know, keep touting it. So all the best horses started to come and all the best sports writers started to come and they would do feature stories, and they would start getting, you know, sometimes by the 30s, they were having movie stars, you know, come and, and, and the whole aura, you know, at that time was very much like let's, you know, create this Southern experience, an old South experience. And My Old Kentucky Home was a part of delivering that.

Sixty five thousand turn out at Churchill Downs for the 71st Kentucky Derby and a record amount is put down on the three year olds in this classic of the American turn....

Emily Bingham: Even in the 90s, early 90s. When I moved here, I remember Derby guests arriving in the airport, two people dressed in hoop skirts, handing out chocolates. And I mean, this was very clearly a evocation of what you're coming in for is an association that's very tied to slave times.

Dan Gediman: So let's back up for a sec.

So out of Nelson County, there's Federal Hill, the Rowan family plantation that has been turned into My Old Kentucky Home state park. Every summer since 1959 they perform the Stephen Foster Story several nights a week. What is the

historical connection between Federal Hill, the Rowan family and Stephen Foster? And why on earth is all this hoopla happening there about this song?

Emily Bingham: Well, right. So predating the adoption of My Old Kentucky Home as the theme song of the Derby, was a movement among what I call boosters like forward thinking business people in Kentucky in Louisville, who saw again, like Matt Winn this song was an attraction, it was a it was people loved it still evoked these old south, you know, it rang those bells in people's minds. And that was a really appealing way to attract visitors and attract positive attention to a state that still was laboring under this. You know, we're very poor. We have feuds where he, we have corrupt leaders, we had a governor assassinated, I mean, sort of this mayhem and, you know, fighting and gouging and reputation that Kentucky also had. So mounting this, this old South version was a antidote, I think, in a way as a brand to Kentucky's reputation in the country. And so what they knew was that there was this house in Nelson County, where the family claimed that Stephen Foster had been inspired to write the song.

And there was a journalist and name named Allison, who was a Foster fanatic. He just believed that Foster was a genius. He was right. And he wanted people to understand that better because Foster himself had kind of petered out by the 1900 or so his reputation was pretty faded. And he started researching, you know, this story, because he thought it would be a great bragging rights, right for Kentucky to have a place to celebrate Foster like that. He could never determine that Foster was actually there. But he had, you know, this family that said so. And it is true, we do know from documentary evidence that Foster was related to the Rowans through his mother, and they were kind of distant cousins. And his sister way back in the 1830s had visited the Rowans both in Louisville and at Federal Hill, when she was a sort of a debutante, you know, aspiring, you know, on the marriage market. So the Foster family had a connection to Kentucky through that. And you know, through this lost sister who was way older than he was, he barely knew her. And she was quite musical apparently. So that's, that's the connection. We know. It's odd that in the intervening years, nothing was really sad about foster ever being there. But anyway, by the 1890s, late 1890s, turn of the century, this story began to get put out there more. And, and so young Allison, the name of this journalist, just, you know, kind of went with it. He started, he really helped start a statewide campaign to raise money to purchase the house from the last survivor of the Rowan family to live there. And they paid a pretty penny for the property, which was in very poor condition. And it opened in 1923. And it's not until the later 20s, that the song really gets institutionalized at Churchill Downs. So anyway, they hire a director who used to be an editor at

Lost Cause Magazine. And he sets up shop for tourists, tourists and thousands and thousands and thousands start to come through because it's the era of the automobile beginning to catch on. And as you can imagine, Bardstown was not on any major train line. So it really helped to access it that that people can drive themselves and go out for excursions from even from Louisville, or places like that. And it just really profoundly changed, I think, the relationship of the state to the song because it was even after that that the state adopted the song as its state anthem.

Dan Gediman: But let's talk for a minute about there has been periodic calls going back always, I think, mostly from black folks to either abolish the song, as the state song to not sing it at the derby or have had other problems with it. Can you talk a little bit about controversies about the song in the past decades?

Emily Bingham: So as early as the 1915 I believe is one of the first I've seen really clear objections came from a group in Boston. There was a black publisher, a newspaper publisher there, who joined with some other activists, white and black, who objected to school children being forced to sing the songs of Stephen Foster and others that contained racial slurs that they said, subjected their children to ridicule and teasing, and then, you know, sort of merciless, demeaning experiences in in public school setting. And they were actually successful in getting the school board to, to stop using the book that contain these songs. And so that's that was a victory for the black community there. But the backlash to that decision was, was quite, you know, I mean, people were just horrified. How could you ever say that these are anything but gentle, lovely, you know, songs that remind us of the humanity of, of, of the slave and the, you know, there are American sort of treasures, these are the songs that are at our heart as a nation and so and it is true, that, I mean, among the blackface minstrel materials, you know, some of you know, Foster's songs that were that we're talking about My Old Kentucky Home, his sort of lachrymose songs is his sorrow sad songs, these, you know, we're meant to draw the tear to the eye, right. And they were sometimes use comically, but they were also used pathetically right so blackface minstrel show audiences love both to laugh and to cry. And Foster was kind of, you know, feeding that that market that way, but anyway, I think you know, the calls to abolish it or have been so many and have gone on for so long, but have been so little attended to.

Dan Gediman: Would have been the major critiques of it here, specific here

Emily Bingham: Here in Louisville?

Dan Gediman: or no in Kentucky, and will you because we use it the derby, but it's also the state's song?

Emily Bingham: I think that going back even to the 1920s, before even was the state song, an important educator here, Joseph Kotter, went to visit federal Hill, and he just was like, Look, this song isn't really speaking to the present times. And he wrote his own version of the song that that sort of took out the, oh, this is the fate of the black man suggestion that I think the song leaves many with.

And, and then I think, during the civil rights era, there was just a general, you know, like, come on you people, you have to stop using I mean, at this point, we're only singing the first verse, and then the chorus. And so the first verse contained, you know, that first line, the D word, using quotes, to refer to the slaves, the darkies, right.

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Emily Bingham: You know, people were really sick of hearing that. At the same time, the issues in front of the black community. In the 50s, and 60s, were so great. That I think for many, it was an irritant, it was a, it was something that was obnoxious. But it just, you know, when you compare that to, you know, being able to walk into a store, and try on clothes, or go to a school that had, you know, decent, resources, I mean, this or vote, this was not the highest, the highest concern. And so, then in the early 70s, Churchill Downs, was forced to, you know, reconsider using the song in its original form, or even the first verse in its original form, because national advertisers were being pressured by the NAACP, about this song, and also all kinds of other, you know, offensive, old material. And so they were, they decided to, to substitute the word people for the D word.

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Emily Bingham: Through late 50s, through the 60s, it was printed in the program with, you know, that other

Dan Gediman: ...original learning lyrics, right. Yeah.

Emily Bingham: And I think also, there was a congressman from Nelson County, named Frank Shelf, he got very exercised in the 50s. About Dinah Shore, who was a white woman who had a variety show successful network TV

show, and she sang My Old Kentucky Home on her show, at one point and substituted I mean, there have been, you know, everything from Paul Robeson on up performers, especially black performers had tried to substitute and done that, but but she did that and Frank Shelf, you know, kind of came on with a ton of bricks and tried to pass a law in Congress to preserve in their original form all such lyrics and from any kind of bastardization that, that Dinah or her friends might want to impose.

Dan Gediman: What are your thoughts about thinking of this song is in any way problematic for the state song, the song we sing at the derby? A song highly associated with both your hometown and your home state?

Emily Bingham: Yeah, well, it's been an occasion for me to think really deeply and gradually, over time, see, ways in which not only was I blind to the backstory of this song, and the way it reinforced many very destructive and demeaning characterizations of black people specifically as happy, content, and at least in you know, they're from the state of Kentucky and their state of their home plantation. That that characterization, I think, is so devastating and so destructive of respect for what slavery was, what its legacy is that this cognitive dissonance that I had, like, I've been singing the song, but I didn't know what it was about. And it's really about slavery. It's about a slave being sold down south. How do we get here? So for me, the journey has really been that question of how did we get here to a place where almost nobody knew that that's what the song was about. Or if they knew it, they were able to just suppress that knowledge. Or even if they knew it, it didn't matter. That it was about that. Those are the things that to me, get at the larger questions that our society is wrestling with, about awareness of the long legacy of the night, the pre Civil War, the slave era, on our country, and on the people white and black of this country. And how systems like a Kentucky Derby, where How would anyone think that this there's anything wrong with a song that 150,000 people get up and stand up for? How Why would you ever second guess that when it is so institutionalized, and so, you know, so ritualized, right, and so honored.

I have black friends and acquaintances who are extremely disturbed, that it gets honor on the same par with the National Anthem, that just really doesn't make any sense to them. And I see why now. But it's taken me a long time to really see how that and how so many other things that we have not been able to perceive, even though they've been right in front of available, the information available right in front of our eyes, as wounding and continuing the wounds that that, you know,

that slavery imposed on our country. And so I think of it as a sonic monument to a segregated memory. And I think it's very important to understand how it became that I think the process is just as important as the decision of exactly how to handle it. Because I don't think unthinking change is going to heal as much as thoughtful change. And I just hope we really have an informed way to think about and go through some of what I think I have had to go through with the song myself of honoring it, loving it, tearing up at it. And finally, for me, I mean, for me at this point, I can't do that anymore. But that's been my own process. And I just don't know really how we can celebrate a song that is about slavery, the way that this song is at its root. And as much as it has been appropriated for things that we might find appalling as well as things that we might find completely benign, like, oh, everyone loves their home and can feel the sense of nostalgia for home. I still think we have to rethink if it still fits with what we want to be as a state as a community. Yeah.

Dan Gediman: Emily Bingham's book, *Singing About Slavery: "My Old Kentucky Home"* will be published in early 2022.