

Introduction

Chauncey Richmond & "The Old Buckbee" joins together the loosely-related stories of a crumbling no-name 1885 banjo, its curiously egoless maker, and its vaudeville-happy player.

"The Old Buckbee" referred to in this book was one of tens of thousands of banjos manufactured at the J. H. Buckbee Co. factory in New York City from the 1870s through the 1890s. Its maker, John Henry Buckbee (1837-1890), a man content to stay behind the scenes, supplied banjos to dozens of other makers and resellers who stenciled their own brand names on the peghead. One banjo-plunking player of a Buckbee-made "Tremont No. 98" (c. 1885) was Chauncey E. Richmond (1872-1910) of North Stonington, Conn., a farmer and rural mail-carrier who, for a few years before his premature death, was also an ascendant vaudeville impresario at a popular lakeside park.

This book inhabits the realm of micro-history, the genre that seeks understanding through the study of ordinary lives and under-the-radar subjects. This book features no generals and no wars. There is no appearance by Teddy Roosevelt ... or Chester A. Arthur. But while in progress, the three tightly-focused studies revealed potential as educative practical examples of the micro-history discipline. Therefore the aim is, in addition to presenting the main content, that the analysis of the project in Appendix II may prove useful to historians, journalists, museum interpreters, genealogists, and all manner of specialty and local history researchers.

The project began with the discovery of the filth-encrusted no-name 5-string banjo in my grandmother's shed in upstate New York in 1982, which is described in detail in the chapter entitled *Discovering "The Old Buckbee."* From 1982, the banjo moved from closet-to-closet until 2017, when it was brought out into the light-of-day to assess the feasibility of restoration. (The restoration is documented in Appendix I: *Restoring "The Old Buckbee."*)

During this assessment, I discovered a stamped imprint on the inner dowel stick of the banjo that I never noticed back in 1982: "Tremont No. 98." As a historian and museum professional, I was determined to decipher this cryptic tidbit. A cursory Google search turned up the usual mix of information, misinformation, assumptions, and mythology. More digging was in order, and it was my own hard-copy library of American music and vaudeville that guided me in placing the shovel. The investigative digging determined that this no-name banjo, in fact, was one of many thousands produced at the factory of J. H. Buckbee in New York before its closure in 1897. The banjo factory in the Tremont neighborhood of the Bronx was, at its zenith, the largest of its kind. This particular c. 1885 Tremont model was distributed by Charles Bruno & Son, a wholesaler of musical instruments also based in New York City.

The information advanced on various websites and even in some otherwise authoritative books on banjo construction and history, however, prompted as many questions as answers. It became apparent that previous research on John Henry Buckbee (1837-1990) and John Henry Buckbee, Jr. (1867-1942) did not probe as deeply as it might have. Aside from the "J.H.B." initials found on the heel of some Buckbee banjos, the "Tremont No. XX" stamp may be the closest thing to Buckbee's own maker's mark on his instruments. The village of Tremont, within the town of West Farms (part of Westchester County until annexed by the Bronx in 1874), was the home of J. H. Buckbee's first factory, the Osborn & Buckbee Drum Factory, first noted on the F. W. Beers Co. town map in 1872. The shifting and overlapping civil jurisdictions, the changing street names, and the surging growth in this area of the Bronx in the late 19th century added confusion to the research. But the more I learned about John Henry Buckbee, Sr. and his factory, the more I realized that his operation did more for broadening the accessibility and popularity of the banjo in the late 19th century than he has been given credit for. To be sure, the 1885 Tremont No. 98 banjo, even in its restored state, is not a showpiece. Although the Buckbee company was known to custom craft ornate banjos for stage performers, most of the banjos produced by the factory were mid-market or economy models. But J. H. Buckbee was arguably "the Henry Ford of the banjo" in his time, offering an eager public entry into the world of banjo music with a solid, reliable, but no-frills instrument at modest cost.

The third study subject in this book, besides the banjo and its maker, is the owner and player of “The Old Buckbee,” Chauncey E. Richmond, the (step) great-grandfather that I never knew. Although I was fortunate to spend a great deal of time with my grandparents as a youth, I never heard any stories about Chauncey Richmond, who died at age 37 in 1910, almost 40 years before I was born. Only after discovery of the banjo in 1982 did my widowed grandmother recall that the instrument belonged to Chauncey, her father-in-law. She told me that he played the banjo, and at one time coordinated entertainment at parks in southeastern Connecticut. Because I was then in the middle of my own busy career in commercial showbusiness – which included, among other more demanding and crowd-pleasing specialties, playing 4-string tenor banjos and 5-string banjos – this tantalizing information was stored away for later research. In 2017, more than three decades later, the restoration of “The Old Buckbee” banjo prompted the research project on the instrument, its maker, and its player.

In addition to the table of contents, a few words about the organization of the book may prove useful:

- **A chronological approach.** Although the title of the book places “Richmond” before “Buckbee,” it is John Henry Buckbee I, his factory, and “The Old Buckbee” banjo that came first, all products of their time in late-Victorian America. To provide an informed perspective of this “parlor banjo” era, a chapter is devoted to banjo history context. Next is the story of the Buckbee banjo factory from its late-1860s origins to its dissolution in 1897. To aid in understanding the principals in the Buckbee business story, family history sketches are provided for both J. H. Buckbee I and II. There is some intentional redundancy in these sketches, so that the chapters still make sense when read independently. Following by a few years chronologically is the short life of Chauncey Richmond, outlined in a brief family history sketch. His 1907-1910 tenure as a park manager and vaudeville promoter is presented in the chapter entitled Chauncey Richmond: Lincoln Park Impresario. Because the three stories are deliberately presented as self-contained entities, feel free to depart from the chronological track to follow your interests.

- **Context is essential.** In a book of this kind of history, in which subjects like the banjo, vaudeville, and trolley-line parks are not of mainstream knowledge, inclusion of historical context is essential.

For historical subjects out of the mainstream, the vacuum of no information is often filled with misinformation and stereotypes. The banjo is a fine example, as most people today associate it only with bluegrass music, and have little knowledge of its varied history in other forms and styles. Ample context is also provided about two genres of popular entertainment relevant to the times, the minstrel show (1840-1890) and vaudeville (1880-1930). This context reveals stereotype-busting details, like black-owned minstrel shows with all-black casts flourishing internationally, and like big-time vaudeville presenting big-time talent, not just sappy comedians in plaid jackets. The family history sketches add layers of context that inform the business history chapters.

- **Appendix I: Restoration of "The Old Buckbee."** This section describes the step-by-step restoration of the 1885 Tremont No. 98 Buckbee banjo, from crumbling wreck to its present playable state.

- **Appendix II: Behind the Narrative – Research, Evidence, & Conclusions.** The three investigations yielded useful insights into the practice of micro-history. This section takes the interested reader behind the narrative for a look at project planning, research execution, evidence analysis, and narrative summation.

Upon completion, this research project that began with one crumbling banjo stored in my closet for 35 years compressed more than 200 years of understanding, from the lifestyle of craft established by a New York chair maker in the early 19th century, through his son J. H. Buckbee the banjo maker, through Chauncey Richmond the banjo-plunking vaudeville promoter, down to me, a 21st century stage performer, historian, and one-and-done banjo-restorer. So enjoy the stories, learn the real history of "America's instrument," digest what is known and unknown, immerse in the context, and absorb the insights about evidence and conclusions. May some elements of this project prove useful in any research *you* do, banjo-related or otherwise. Happy reading.

– **Reginald W. Bacon**
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May 2018