

Music of the Young Republic: *Amazing Grace*, An Iconic American Tune by John Newton, 1772; William Walker, *Southern Harmony*, Benjamin White, *The Sacred Harp*

First published in 1835 but reprinted several times, Walker's *Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* became America's most popular book of tunes. Though published in 1835, the book was a compendium of hymns and songs that originated much earlier in U.S. history. Almost 600,000 copies were sold. In 1844 by Walker's brother-in-law Benjamin Franklin White published an equally popular collection of tunes, *The Sacred Harp*. The books used a new and rather "democratic" form of notation, designed for those who had not been formally trained to read music, called "shape note." This style of a cappella church music began in rural 1700s America because where few people could read music. By the early 1800s, books were being published using a system called fasola notation, developed by a Philadelphia shopkeeper. Notes were printed on an ordinary staff, for those who could read music, but also drawn in one of four shapes to indicate a position on the scale.

According to Steve Turner's book *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, the song was composed in 1772 by John Newton, a notorious slave trader who had a dramatic conversion to abolitionism, and was written without "ceremony" in an attic room where Newton wrote weekly hymns to amplify the message of his sermons. When Newton put the internal rhyme "amazing grace" together, it wasn't purely for poetic reasons. He understood grace to mean God's unmerited favor to lost souls. Turner says it was a meaning Newton — with his sordid history and personal tale of redemption — could take to heart.

Amazing Grace was first heard on New Year's Day in 1773, though not with the same melody that we hear today. Newton supplied the lyrics, but the tune sung today arrived much later; originally the song would have been sung "to another song that fit its meter." *Amazing Grace* continued to be associated with a number of different tunes throughout much of the 19th century, but in 1835, Newton's lyrics were combined with the familiar tune we know today by a South Carolina singing instructor named William Walker, whose *Southern Harmony* quickly became the most popular songs book in the country.

Turner attributes the early popularity of "Amazing Grace" in America to the religious revivalism of that period between the 1st and 2nd Great Awakenings, when a dramatic conversion experience was a common aspect of religious piety. The lyrics, 'I once was lost but now I'm found. I was blind but now I see...' provide a simple yet powerful description of the personal conversion experience. Turner also notes that the song makes an appearance in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which came to be embraced by abolitionist forces as an indictment of plantation life and slavery. The collective trauma of the Civil War helped to solidify the song's popularity.

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