

“They Look Like Men of War”—The Deep River Boys (1941)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

Essay by Sandra Jean Graham (guest post)*



45rpm disc

In the winter of 1863–64, then lieutenant colonel Samuel Chapman Armstrong (1839–1893), commander of six companies of the 9th Regiment, US Colored Troops, at Benedict, Maryland, heard the soldiers singing a hymn that deeply impressed him: “They Look Like Men of War.” In 1941, against the backdrop of a world war, the gospel group, the Deep River Boys, recorded that same song. Although Armstrong was not alive to hear it, the recording might never have been made if not for him.

“How the men sang at night around their camp fires!” wrote Armstrong in his autobiography. Although he dismissed much of the singing as “rude” and “uncouth,” he was drawn from his tent one night by “a wonderful chorus. The men had struck up an old church hymn-- ‘*They look like men of war; all arm’d and dress’d in uniform, they look like men of war*’” (quoted by his daughter, Edith Armstrong Talbot, in her biography). As Christian G. Samito has observed, despite the Black troops’ second-rate uniforms and subpar guns, those accoutrements nonetheless represented a significant change in status. This is evident in the hymn’s refrain, in which “Black soldiers proudly proclaimed their manhood on accepting their equipment” (p. 47):

*They look like men, they look like men,
They look like men of war;
All armed and dressed in uniform,
They look like men of war.*

The men’s hearty singing of these words sent through Armstrong “a sensation I shall never forget. It became their battle-hymn.”

Armstrong went on to become a general and to found Hampton Institute (Hampton, Virginia) for Black students in 1868. He wove that “battle hymn” into the school’s institutional history, ensuring its regular singing at chapel. It was in the repertory of the famed Hampton Institute Singers, who began touring the North in 1873, and it’s likely through them that other jubilee troupes (groups of African American students singing spirituals) like the Tennesseans acquired and performed it. The hymn was first printed in a Hampton songbook in 1901, under the title “The Enlisted Soldiers” (Fenner et al., “Cabin and Plantation Songs, as sung by the Hampton Students”), and it’s a testament to its popularity that it remained in the updated 1927 edition prepared by R. Nathaniel Dett, Hampton’s first African American director of music (from 1913 to 1932), retitled “They Look Like Men of War.” (Dett’s fondness for the hymn appears to have been genuine, for he continued to program it with other choirs for at least a decade after he left Hampton.)

In 1936, several members of the Hampton Glee Club decided to form a group and perform independently. Calling themselves the Hampton Institute Junior Quartet, they were: Harry Douglass (1916–1999; baritone and group leader); Vernon Gardner (first tenor); George Lawson (second tenor), and Edward Ware (bass). Ray Durant served as pianist and Charles Ford as arranger. They relocated to New York City and had a string of modest successes, including winning first place and \$100 on the “Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour” radio program (1936), serving as a warmup act for a revival of “Emperor Jones,” joining a promotional tour for the film “Green Pastures” (released in 1936), and performing novelties in the 1939 musical “Swingin’ the Dream” (an adaptation of Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which starred Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman among a cast of luminaries). Rex Ingram, who played De Lawd in “Green Pastures,” urged the quartet to adopt the name Deep River Boys, after the spiritual that served as their theme song. The singers auditioned for CBS radio in 1936 but were turned down because their repertory contained no popular songs--only spirituals. They came back the following year with 20 new songs and earned a radio contract. According to Jay Warner, they had to learn 20–30 songs a week to keep their sound fresh (p. 21). In 1940, they signed a recording contract with RCA Victor’s Bluebird label and crossed over to NBC’s Blue Radio Network. As their fame spread over time, entertainment companies pressured the group to set aside the Hampton spirituals--and the beloved hymn “They Look Like Men of War”--in favor of more jazz-inflected popular music, R&B, and rock ’n’ roll. These were the genres that came to define their later career, as new members came and went. Despite a substantial number of commercial recordings (39 singles, 11 albums), and numerous appearances in films and on TV, the Deep River Boys found their greatest success in live performance--especially in Europe, where they toured for half the year and had an enthusiastic following.

Although “They Look Like Men of War” was often credited as “traditional” on radio and concert programs--when it was credited at all--the hymn was actually written by North Carolinian John A. Granade (1770–1807), a white Methodist circuit riding preacher, and Hattie Hill (dates unknown). The earliest print versions of the hymn consist of text only, most often under the title “Hark! Listen to the Trumpeter,” and occasionally under “The Trumpeters” or “The Volunteers” (with the spiritual “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho” serving as the refrain). As a common meter (8.6.8.6) hymn, it fit with a wide variety of hymn tunes; in hymnbooks that print the score, the tune varies and is notated in quadruple meter. As early as 1837, there is evidence of association with Black worship, when the text appears in “The African Methodist Episcopal

Church Hymn Book.” The tune used at Hampton is unusual for its triple meter. The Deep River Boys made their own arrangement, although they follow the harmony given in “Cabin and Plantation Songs.”

Seventy-seven hymnals print the hymn (hymnary.org), and the texts are remarkably consistent, as is the strophic form. The major difference in the Hampton/Deep River Boys version is the inclusion of a refrain, a form familiar from spirituals and camp-meeting songs:

*1. Hark! listen to the trumpeters!
They call for volunteers,
On Zion's bright and flowery mount
Behold the officers!*

Refrain

*They look like men, they look like men
They look like men of war;
All armed and dressed in uniform,
They look like men of war.*

*2. Their horses white, their armor bright,
With courage bold they stand,
Enlisting soldiers for their King
To march to Canaan's land. (refrain)*

*3. They follow their great General,
The great Eternal Lamb;
His garments stained in His own blood,
King Jesus is His name. (refrain)*

*4. We want no cowards in our band
That will their colors fly;
We call for valiant-hearted men
Who're not afraid to die. (refrain)*

The refrain seems to derive from the fifth verse, which was originally printed in “Cabin and Plantation Songs”: “*To see our armies on parade, / How martial they appear, / All armed and dressed in uniform, / They look like men of war.*” The four iterations of the phrase “*they look like men*” in the refrain can be heard as a potent reminder of Black manhood at a time when Black men were often treated as boys.

The Deep River Boys recorded “They Look Like Men of War” as a single on a Lang-Worth transcription disc; the Lang-Worth label, founded by Cy Langlois, issued jazz and popular music on large discs that were sold to radio stations in the 1930s and 1940s and were not available in stores. (The Deep River Boys' “Lang-Worth Broadcasts,” vol. 1, is available on streaming services and is definitely worth listening to!) The year it was issued, 1941, coincided with the United States' entrance into World War II and the Deep River Boys' service with the newly

established USO. At the end of 1941, Dorie Miller, a crewman aboard the *West Virginia*, became the first national hero of the war and the first African American to be awarded the Navy Cross for his service at Pearl Harbor. Because of General Armstrong and the Deep River Boys' preservation of Hampton music traditions, a hymn that had given Black recruits fortitude during the Civil War crossed over into a new century and a new war, a recognition of what men of war looked and sounded like.

Sandra Jean Graham is Professor of Ethnomusicology at Babson College and author of "Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry" (University of Illinois Press, 2018).

References

- Cantor, Mark. "Celluloid Improvisations: The Deep River Boys." *IAJRC Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2016): 24–28.
- Cooper, Agnes. "Music Notes and Half-Notes." *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), 12 April 1942: 30.
- Dett, R. Nathaniel. *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*. Hampton, VA: Hampton Institute Press, 1927.
- Fenner, Thomas P.; Frederick G. Rathbun; and Bessie Cleaveland (comp.). *Cabin and Plantation Songs, as sung by the Hampton Students*. 3rd ed. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901.
- Samito, Christian G. *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.
- Swingin' the Dream* program. *Playbill*, 4 Dec. 1939 (New York Theatre Program Corporation); <https://www.playbill.com/production/swingin-the-dream-center-theatre-vault-0000012011#carousel-cell209123>.
- Talbot, Edith Armstrong. *Samuel Chapman Armstrong: A Biographical Study*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1904.
- Warner, Jay. *American Singing Groups: A History from 1940s to Today*, pp. 21–23. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.