

Street Cries of the District of Columbia

It was wholly within the possibilities for these songs to be virtually lost. The people who created them were not capable of recording them, and the conditions out of which this music sprang and by which it was nourished have almost passed away.

James Weldon Johnson, "The Book of American Negro Spirituals" (1925)



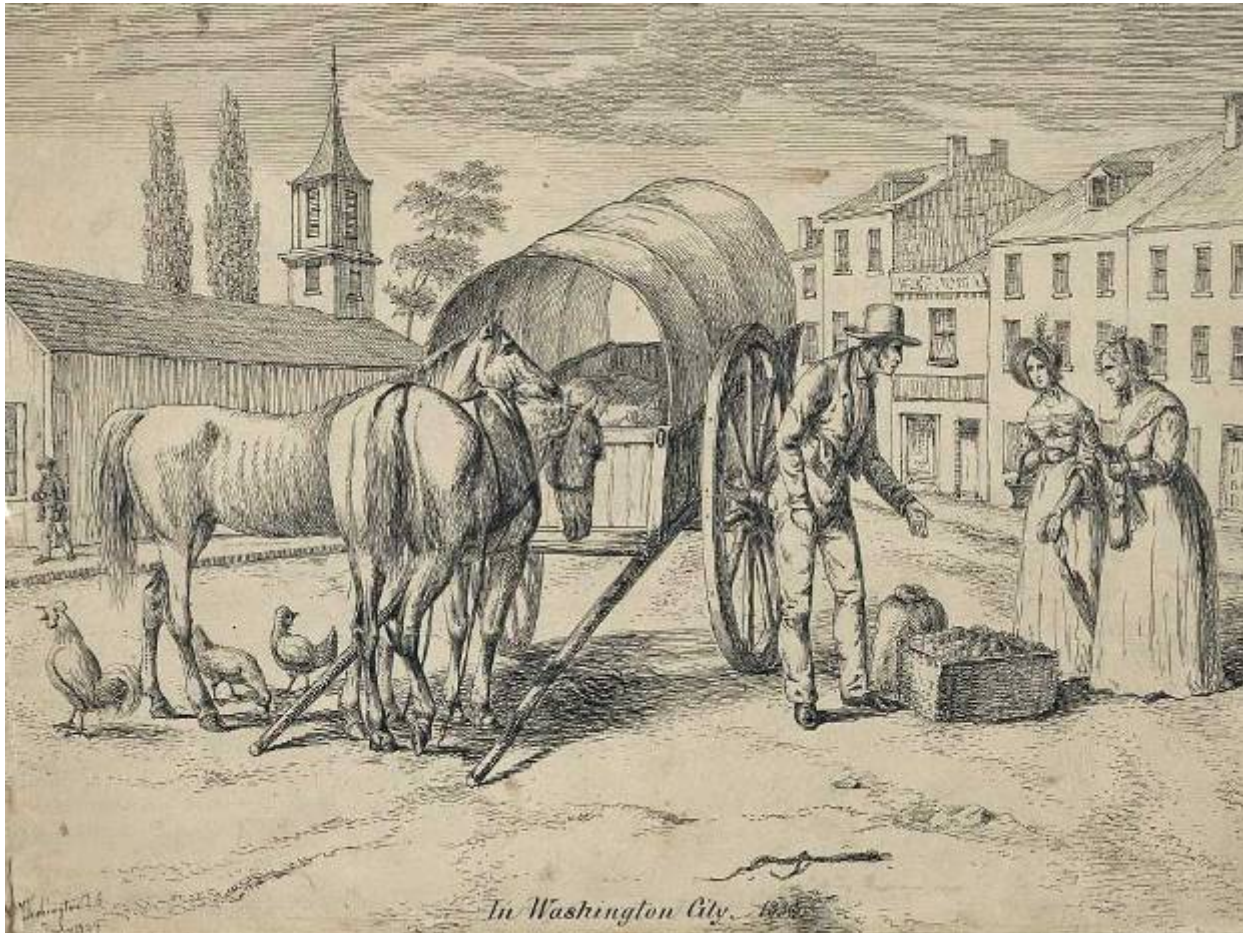
city is so much more than its buildings. Yet, for all the raising up, tearing down and renovating, structures remain the most enduring markers of its identity. More ephemeral and less tangible artifacts of urban life, like once-characteristic street sounds, are often simply forgotten. The greater part of the noise of the contemporary city is generated by automobiles: humming engines, squealing brakes, blaring horns, screeching alarms, shrieking sirens, booming stereos, and the occasional but relentless ice-cream-truck jingle. The last, a direct commercial appeal to community residents, is a descendant of a formerly common phenomenon: the human voice raised to attract buyers to a product.

Among the earliest forms of advertising, peddlers' street cries may be as old as cities, as old as history itself, reaching the literate and untutored alike. But what poet and anthologist James Weldon Johnson wrote of the evanescence of spirituals was equally true of these urban, pre-radio "commercials" which, in the South, were also typically the creations of African-American entrepreneurs. Employed by stationary vendors at the markets of the District of Columbia, they were essential to the hucksters who carried their wares through town on their person or on pushcarts and wagons. An annoyance to some, such cries were effectively outlawed at the turn of the twentieth century, prefiguring recent battles between Washington residents, buskers, restaurateurs and shops over outdoor music.

The 1803 census of Washington City enumerated a single resident "huckster" by occupation, but almost 650 were licensed a century later. Nearer the latter date, one observer remarked on the calls with which they advertised their goods:

The rounded cadences of the musical voices for which they are noted fall softly on the ear of one who has been accustomed to the shrill cry of the Northern or Western street men. And they use their voices in Washington,

too, for you do not so often hear the clanging of the horn as in New York. They have good strong lungs and they don't hesitate to use them.¹



*A Washington huckster or farmer depicted in an 1839 drawing by Augustus Köllner.
Library of Congress.*

One of the oldest, and certainly the lengthiest, of the peddlers' cries that have come down to us predates the 1846-1847 retrocession of the town and county of Alexandria, D.C. to Virginia. Alfred Noland, enslaved but living independently from his Fairfax County master (and likely blood relative), hawked oysters through the dirt and cobble streets of Alexandria during the evenings of the colder months, delivering them shucked to his customers at their doors. Before trudging through town lugging them in his "shiny tin bucket", Noland bought his bivalves from the Potomac wharves, off schooners newly landed from the mouth of the Commonwealth's York River.²

¹ "Some Street Cries", *The Critic-Record*, February 21, 1889.

² See "Alfred Noland and the Oysterman Song", Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery website, freedmenscemetery.org/resources/families/documents/noland.pdf.

Here's my nice city O! Here's my nice Yorkey Oysters.
 Here's my nice city O! High relished Oysters.
 Here's my Oysters as nice as can be;
 Pray will you buy any? Pray can you buy any?
 Here are Oysters as nice as you ever did see,
 Pray will you buy any from me?
 Here are my Oysters as nice as can be,
 And they are all for the use of the city,
 They are nice, and fresh and just from the shell;
 I can't tell the reason my Oysters wont sell.
 My Oysters are sweet they are round and complete,
 For Oysters at ten cents a pint.
 Oh, my father he dwelt in Roseberry Lane,
 He opened nice oysters and I do the same;
 For every oyster is round as a clam,
 And every oyster is fat as a lamb;
 Most beautiful oysters! high relished oysters,
 The prettiest oysters you ever did see.
 Oh, ladies and gentlemen take great delight,
 In having nice oysters for supper at night.
 My oysters are white and my kettles are bright,
 And if you won't buy my oysters I'll bid you good night.
 Good night ladies, good night gentlemen,
 Good night ladies and gentlemen all.³

13

14

The melodies, the rhythm allowed recall of such extended patter. The notes of the sales pitch are lost, except that the wording of lines 13 and 14 reveals that part of this "Song of the Oysterman" was cribbed from the opening of a ribald Scottish or English ballad, *Roseberry Lane*,⁴ known by various titles and lyrics, including the following version:



It's once I was a ser-ving girl in Rose-ber-ry Lane. I had a kind



mas-ter, my mis-tress was the same. Till one day a sail-or lad came

³ "An Alexandria Reminiscence", *The Alexandria Gazette*, February 1, 1865.

⁴ See traditionalmusic.co.uk/song-midis/Roseberry_Lane.htm for lyrics and sound files.

A half century later, even as the York River reefs played out, oysters remained as familiar to Chesapeake dining tables as beef, and the shellfish were now canned and shipped to all points by rail. Washington hucksters still extolled the virtues of their fresh fruits of the bay, picking up bushels of the bivalves at the 11th Street wharf and shucking and selling them by the pint within a stone's throw. Their cries were terser now, as simple as "Oysh-t-u-r!", more easily repeated to passersby. A more ambitious "Oys! Oys! Here's yer nice fresh oys! Fine oys; sweet oys; nice *fresh* oys!" was sung "in a very high key, then dropping into low-toned, rounded notes, and at last dying away in almost pathetic cadences, only to rise again, this time higher, shriller and more long drawn out."⁵ "One vendor... [with] the manner of a jovial opera tenor", elaborated "in a sort of recitative":

Here's your oyster, fresh and fine,
All read-dy for sup-per time;
Little ones for the ladies,
Big ones for the babies,
An' some for ole men an' young men too!⁶

Another versifier was the clam dealer:

Clam man comin' an' goin' 'way,
Better buy yo' clams to-day.⁷

In those days, undried and unsalted seafood was either fresh or fertilizer, lending itself to the immediacy of streetside sales. A call of "Fresh fish!"⁸ was generic enough to be forgettable, and "Fresh her-ring!"⁹ could be heard year 'round in Washington, if ocean-caught fish supplemented the May "river herring" run. A common springtime cry offered "Fresh roe shad!"¹⁰ a bony anadromous fish that had been netted in the Potomac by Necostin Indians and George Washington's slaves alike. At spawning time, the females were easy to land and treasured for their tasty eggs. The shad man "knows that his season is comparatively short, and so he atones for it by added vociferation. One of his peculiarities is that he dwells with considerably more insistence upon the 'roe' end

⁵ "All, All Have Gone", *The Evening Star*, May 30, 1903; "Some Street Cries", *The Critic-Record*, February 21, 1889.

⁶ Helen Nicolay, *Our Capital on the Potomac*, (Washington, D.C.: Century Company, 1924), p. 519.

⁷ "Here and There", *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1892.

⁸ "All, All Have Gone", *The Evening Star*, May 30, 1903.

⁹ "On Washington Streets", *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

¹⁰ "The Huckster Nuisance", *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1888; "On Washington Streets", *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

of his double-worded cry than he does upon the [nearly inaudible] ‘shad.’”¹¹

Shad season overlapped that of another Maryland delicacy, the blue crab. “The crab man’s coming round!”¹² could signify that the whole article was available steamed, but the crustacean was more manageable and desired in its prepared form, the forerunner of crab cakes. “Deviled crabs, deviled crabs, who will buy my deviled crabs?”¹³ and “Deviled crabs, boss; fine deviled crabs?”¹⁴ were “sung in a high, explosive staccato that made it hard to decide whether they were Democrats or shell-fish....” recalled the daughter of President Lincoln’s personal secretary. “This was a cry that began with the blossoming of the first syringa [i.e., lilac] bush and was heard until the exiled oyster returned to its own [in autumn].... Nobody died from eating these dainties, sold on the hot streets from push-carts the size of toy express wagons; but in what dark and unhallowed spots they were prepared, was a fathomless secret.”¹⁵ “Rock fish! Rock fish! Nice fresh rock fish, sound fish, fresh fish, here’s your nice fresh fish!”¹⁶ was another sign of spring, while “Catfish, catfish, fresh and fleshy!”¹⁷ might ring out much of the year.

The dialect renderings of their cries indicate that, like Alfred Noland, nearly all itinerant fishmongers and most hawkers of all sorts were African Americans. Black residents were the backbone of the District’s laboring classes, but discrimination had effectively shut out black entrepreneurs from most shops and market houses. They turned to vending goods on the street, carrying wares in packs, pails, baskets or pushcarts. During the Civil War, the peddlers selling pies and vegetables at army camps were formerly enslaved. After the war, Center Market—where the National Archives now stands—was the city’s busiest spot on Saturday mornings, but its indoor stalls and even most spots along its exterior walls were reserved to white vendors. Curbside space—the gutter, really—was free for the taking “first come, first choose”, and African Americans there offered fruit, vegetables, wild or domesticated fowl, flowers, folk remedies, natural sponges, Christmas greenery, trinkets and notions. Space was available to the truck farmers and licensed hucksters on the south side of B Street, where the Washington City Canal had been filled, and jockeying for prime spots caused friction between the farmers, wholesalers and hucksters.

It was said that street cries were generally in the minor key, to reduce stress on the

¹¹ “Crying Their Wares”, *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1899.

¹² “All, All Have Gone”, *The Evening Star*, May 30, 1903.

¹³ “On Washington Streets”, *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

¹⁴ “Turn Noise to Melody”, *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1908.

¹⁵ Nicolay, p. 518.

¹⁶ “Some Street Cries”, *The Critic-Record*, February 21, 1889.

¹⁷ “The Ear”, *The Washington Star*, January 17, 1981.



Above: "Flower-sellers in the market at Washington, D.C." by A.L. Jackson. Harper's Weekly, June 4, 1870. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Right: One of the flower and vegetable hucksters at Center Market, 1902. A few of the older truck gardeners from the country dressed much as they had decades earlier, and still smoked clay pipes. Photo from the Washington Times, April 27, 1902.



Perhaps most familiar to generations of Washingtonians was the May cry of the strawberry seller. According to one source, “S-t-r-a-w-berry! S-t-r-a-w-berry!” was the common refrain, “dwelling long on the first syllable and chopping off the last with falling inflection. [The vendors] all had the same air, and sang the words in the same key.”²⁷ Another disputed this; the strawberry man—with a voice like a boatswain’s mate—never varied “on his long, breath-exhausting shout, that begins like a protracted note on a bassoon and winds up like flat xylophone rataplaning—‘Straw-aw-aw—beri-beri-beri-beri-zz.’”²⁸ This particular call may have been that recollected decades later as “the most long-drawn-out, and perhaps the best of them all.”²⁹ Despite their purported sameness, others remembered them still differently: “Straw-bay-reez! Straw-bay-reez! Purty straw-bay-reez! Two quarts for a quahtah”³⁰ and a version that elided the “r”s: “Strawbe - es, strawbe - es, strawbe-e-e-es.”³¹

He was GAME, and would plug half a dozen melons until you got the one you wanted. As a boy I would always beg the privilege of buying a watermelon from Joe—for not only would I bite the heart off the end of the plug, but old Joe always had a small slice—a sample as it were—for his

³¹ "We All Know Them", *The Evening Star*, November 20, 1897.

regular customers.

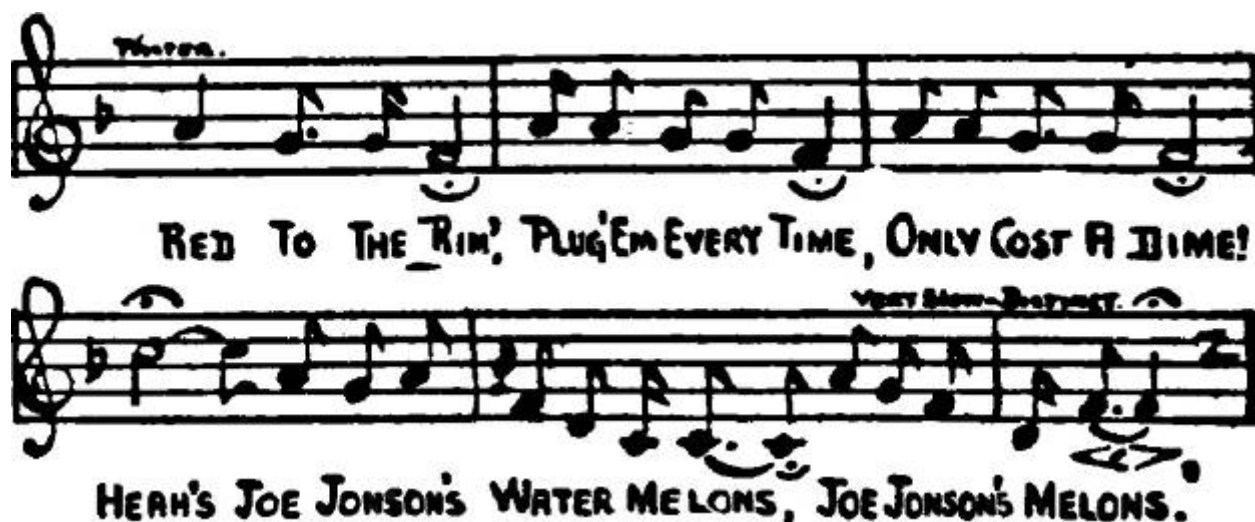
We all loved him, and when he sounded that call his rich baritone voice could be heard for squares. A lost child... always could be located near Joe's wagon. It's been nigh on to forty years since I heard old Joe sing, but I never forgot his call.³²



*A Washington strawberry vendor and tantalized boys circa 1900.
Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Fortunately, that reminiscence came from one Ed Droop, a second-generation Washington piano dealer able to set down Jonson's call in musical notation:

³² "Ed Droop's Musical Memory", *The Times*, June 18, 1918.



A competitor of Joe's was another of the hucksters known to "drop" into verse:

Here yo' watermelons, fresh and fine,
Jus' now pulled 'em offen de vine.³³

By the end of the century, a significant number of Italian and Greek newcomers earned a living as fruit dealers and confectioners. On spring afternoons, one Sicilian banana seller would push his cart from the wharves to the town's outskirts "with his cock-sure call 'Bananz, 15 centa de duz,' but when, weary and footsore, and with his stock only half sold [at dusk, he is heard] dismally crying, 'Bananz, on'y five centa de duz,' there is an imploring timbre in his tones that often wins him [sympathetic] customers...."³⁴ Candy peddlers offered peppermint, lemon and licorice sticks, "all-day" suckers and balls of coconut wrapped in oiled paper. The barks of the salt-water taffy man were said to blend cheerfully with other downtown street sounds, with a cheeky "'spiel' to back up his simple announcement of 'Salt-water taffy'": "Right out of the sea, pink as coral, warranted to improve the teeth and complexion, only feeve, oh, feeve cents, one half dime a bunch—now is there anybody else?"³⁵ Fred Droop recalled the circa 1886 call of another sweets vendor. "The peanut song was used by a fine-looking heavy-set Italian who was always immaculately dressed in white and wore a sombrero. He was never without a fan, and carried his tray in front, suspended by a strap across the shoulder. He sang with a slight lisp in a high tenor key"³⁶:

³³ "Here and There", *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1892.

³⁴ "Crying Their Wares", *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1899.

³⁵ "Crying Their Wares", *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1899.

³⁶ "Ed Droop's Musical Memory", *The Times*, June 13, 1918.



Fall brought out another son of Italy to chant “Roast-a chestnut-a, 5-a-cent-a pint-a.”³⁷

Fin-de-siècle summers would find children—and a certain Supreme Court justice—crowded around purveyors of ice cream and shaved ice. “Immaculate in four-cornered cap and dazzling apron... [t]he snowball man’s call is of the short, choppy variety, with the accentuation almost entirely on the ‘snow,’ and on a hot day the sound is really not unpleasing. It tells of cool and fever-reducing breezes, of the low-laughing water and the murmuring tree.” The “white-capped and spotless-aproned” ice-cream man primly advertised only with the appearance of his cart downtown. “Uptown, however, he belongs to the category of howlers.... [Focusing on neighborhood schools,] he gets all of the children to howling in imitation... that nerve-unseating slogan, ‘Ho-key-po-key ice cream,’ issuing in piping trebles from their throats.”³⁸

Food was far from the only item traded along Washington’s streets; fuel was another household necessity. Although largely gas-lit by the turn of the century, the city still drew peddlers of coal oil and kerosene to fill portable lamps and heaters, and to serve as cleaning agents. “The oil sellers have a peculiar cry, which is not to be understood unless it is taken in connection with a view of the cryer and his push cart full of cans. It sounds like ‘ka-lile,’ with a very strong accentuation on the last syllable, and it is repeated so rapidly that it sounds like the rattle of musketry.” Because the affluent ordered their own coal deliveries, the battered wagon and mournful cry of the coal seller was commonplace in the poorer quarters, where the product was sold by the bucket. “[I]n the street call of the black coal hawker there is poignant grief... It begins on a low note, gradually ascends on a long gamut, reaches a high minor that sounds like the wind sobbing through pine trees and then inappreciably falls to the original note... Co-oh-oh-OH-oh-al.”³⁹ Alternatives stressing the long “o” were “C-o-al, c-o-a-

³⁷ “The Shifting Scenes”, *The Evening Star*, October 4, 1897.

³⁸ “Crying Their Wares”, *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1899.

³⁹ “Crying Their Wares”, *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1899.

l,' running up in two notes"⁴⁰ and the "doleful, dreary cry c-o-k-e." The burning of fuel in household stoves produced copious ashes to be removed with other refuse by the "Ash-man, ol' ash-man, Ashman."⁴¹ Usually "possessed [of] a horse and rig which had long outlived their usefulness", he would cry down the alleys and side streets "old ash-chees, old ash-chees."⁴²

A low-end trade in small items involved children or the infirm. A fixture of the Great Depression, the street-corner pencil man got his start in a previous depression of the 1890s: "Pen-cils, pen-cils. Pity the old pen-cil man. Pen-cils."⁴³ Newspaper boys were a still-earlier phenomenon, common since the mid nineteenth century. They were sometimes orphans or runaways and alternatively treated as nuisances or charity cases. People would complain of their repetitive cries, and they were often accused of overcharging. Some played upon buyers' sympathies: "Please mister, buy a paper; I am stuck."⁴⁴ Many hailed from other cities and even other countries. A Newsboy's and Children's Aid Society founded a home for the urchins after the Civil War. Around 1910, Lewis Hine interviewed and photographed many newsboys as research for the National Child Labor Committee. Most were white; it was said that the wartime *Washington Chronicle*, for instance, would not permit African-American youth to represent it, but the paper had "no compunctions against the filthiest and meanest of our foreign *gamins* loudly vending their very respectable sheet..."⁴⁵ Their shouts might name the paper or trumpet the headlines. "Hi, wuxtry; hi, wuxtry" announced an extra edition with breaking news—although sometimes the boys faked it to make a sale. Newsies and their peers might sideline in chewing gum sales, or plead "Buy some shoestrings, mister?"⁴⁶

Many street transactions involved recycling or repair rather than retail. A cry ubiquitous in large cities was the sing-song of the junk dealer or rag picker: "Ra-eegs, ra-eegs, buy yo' ole ra-eegs"⁴⁷ or "Ra-aggs, ra-aggs!"⁴⁸ Another version, "'Rags, bottles an' ole bones!" typically accompanied by handcart bells of all shapes and sizes... was more on the staccato order, short and quick, suddenly coming to life out of nothing, and then relapsing."⁴⁹ The sounds would send children scrambling for household detritus to trade for pennies. "Yeast powder bottles, patent medicine bottles, all old bottles had a

⁴⁰ "All, All Have Gone", *The Evening Star*, May 30, 1903.

⁴¹ "On Washington Streets", *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

⁴² "Fewer Street Noises", *The Evening Star*, January 12, 1907.

⁴³ "On Washington Streets", *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

⁴⁴ "The Little Business Man of the Street", *The Sunday Star*, August 25, 1907.

⁴⁵ "A Bond of Sympathy", *The National Republican*, August 14, 1865.

⁴⁶ "Turn Noise to Melody", *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1908.

⁴⁷ "Here and There", *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1892.

⁴⁸ "On Washington Streets", *The Times*, April 1, 1900.

⁴⁹ "Millions in Junk", *The Sunday Star*, June 5, 1921.



Gum vendors and newsboys, 1912. National Child Labor Committee Collection, Library of Congress. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, newsies were generally regarded as delinquents, but they were essential to moving daily papers from street corners, decades before they bicycled them to suburban subscribers' doorsteps. Paid a pittance, they sometimes added a personal surcharge, prompting the newsrooms to publish their prices as the same from newsboys as from newsstands. Lewis Hine covered newsies in his studies of child labor. As young as five, boys sometimes worked past midnight. When Hine shot his Washington photos, many of the newsboys were children of Jewish and Italian immigrant families.

market price" as cullet for the manufacture of more glass. "[R]usty, broken bits of buggies, carts and stoves" were similarly useful as scrap, while bones could be ground into fertilizer, and rags went into paper and other items. A version of the call—"Any ole rags, bottles an' old bones today?"⁵⁰—was one of many similar that inspired the popular 1902 black-face vaudeville song *Any Rags*,⁵¹ but city directories suggest that the District's junk dealers were then about evenly split between African Americans and Jews. It was an exaggeration then to say of "the 'ol clo' man, who puts all the accent in the in the old and very little in the clothes[, that h]e is generally white, in fact you never see [an African American] crying old clothes.... [His voice] is not so pleasant... It has a persuasive twang, however..."⁵² Another common visitor was the scissors-sharpener, who could put an edge on any household cutlery, but relied more on a horn or bells

⁵⁰ "Millions in Junk", *The Sunday Star*, June 5, 1921.

⁵¹ [youtube.com/watch?v=A908CsCxmJg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A908CsCxmJg).

⁵² "Some Street Cries", *The Critic-Record*, February 21, 1889.

than his own cries. But none “is to be compared from a musical point of view with the queer-looking citizen whose one refrain consists in the three words, ‘Umbrellas to mend!’... [in] a voice of such pure tenor quality...”⁵³



A scored New York umbrella man’s cry resembled those of Washington.



Left: Newspaper vending was not solely a boy’s game. With her “ringing voice singing out ‘Here’s yer Star; Star here’” or “Star pa-aper”, “Evening Star Mary”—an old Irishwoman actually named Bridget Nicholas and a favorite of President McKinley—had hawked the Star in the financial district from the time it was still a four-page sheet until 1905.

Center: John L. Seamark, a cockney and a veteran of the British army, was known as the “original” cough drop man, to distinguish him from interloper Christopher W. Weston, whom he once punched in the jaw over their rivalry. “Seamark’s celebrated tidbits,” began one “sing song recitation” in his “basso profundo”. “Five cents a package. P-h-i-l-a-delphia cough drops. Good for coughs or colds.”

Right: One of a couple of “pencil men” downtown at the turn of the century.

The Evening Star, December 16, 1893, December 28, 1901, November 20, 1897 and November 8, 1905.

⁵³ “We All Know Them”, *The Evening Star*, November 20, 1897.

Anger and appreciation

Street cries had always been a source of irritation and occasionally violence. An 1854 rumble between the rival bakeries of James Frasier and William McKelden was incited by the stentorian boasts of Frasier's men outside the McKelden store: "Look out for Frasier's family bread and tea biscuit... Sold eleven hundred and thirty-seven loaves on one route and can't be beat!" Not ones to take such a provocation lying down, McKelden's bakers marched on Frasier's home at F and 13th Streets NW shouting "Sour bread and stale biscuits!" A "riot" and arrests ensued, with one man cut on the hand. An impartial observer called it "the worst fight he had ever seen; two stout Irishmen could have whipped the whole party."⁵⁴



A daguerreotype of an unidentified peddler taken at an unknown location (possibly Poughkeepsie, New York), circa 1850. Library of Congress.

There were dust-ups between hucksters in later years—and between hucksters and their wholesalers, and hucksters and their competition at the markets and shops! But with their ballooning numbers, the principal controversy was annoyance at their street

⁵⁴ "Difficulties Among the Bakers", *The Washington Sentinel*, August 26, 1854.

cries. Clement weather attracted more hawkers while it opened more windows. With most city denizens residing only steps from a sidewalk, repeated shouts could be nerve-racking.

A porter grumbled about his tribulations living in the vicinity of the Library of Congress, “a favorite market for these street vendors... two or three crying their goods at once at an unreasonable hour, and with such sharp rivalry that pandemonium is forcibly suggested.”⁵⁵ Signed “An Invalid”, another letter to the *Evening Star* counted

the cries of one strawberry vendor as he went the length of our block, and it is a short one. He cried twelve times in the distance and four ‘strawberries’ to a cry, making forty-eight yells in a voice that could be heard a quarter of a mile. He was only one of nine strawberry hucksters who went the same distance in the day with the same amount of noise. Innumerable ‘banana’ men, equally vociferous, pursued the same course, while a large supply of ‘shad’ men, ‘umbrella’ and ‘c—o—k—e’ bawlers, not to mention ‘deviled crabs’ and hand organs. Now what remedy is there for all this?”⁵⁶

The *Washington Post*’s editors described “One man on a wagon and an advance agent on each side of the street, each yelling in his turn, or all screaming at once... followed by dozens of similar outfits, goes up and down the same streets in the course of the day... [V]egetables have thus been offered for sale after 9 o’clock p.m.”⁵⁷

Not to be outdone, an *Evening Star* columnist took up the now-common grievance:

The worst of it is that the nuisance is steadily increasing. The street fiends are all the time inventing new yells and new forms of ear-bursting atrocity. The weak-lunged vendor resorts to horrible metallic dins to overtop the vocal jargon of his competitors. Some of the street vendors now go about ringing huge gong-bells, with which they murder sleep and torture the sick. The way the thing is going on we shall soon have the terrible calliope mounted on every milk wagon or huckster’s cart!⁵⁸

Since its beginning, the city had licensed peddlers, but it was not until the 1880s that license badges were issued, and seller’s wagons were required to carry identification numbers, so police could easily spot unlicensed vendors. Associates cheated the system

⁵⁵ “Protest Against Noisy Huckstering”, *The Washington Post*, April 27, 1895.

⁵⁶ “A Protest Against the Tuneless Huckster”, *The Evening Star*, May 10, 1890.

⁵⁷ “The Voice of the Huckster”, *The Washington Post*, July 3, 1896.

⁵⁸ “Noisy Nuisances”, *The Evening Star*, May 21, 1881.

by effectively sharing licenses; when questioned, a badgeless hawker would identify himself as the licensee and excuse himself to retrieve the “forgotten” tag.

The first police regulation of street cries also appeared in the early 1880s, but it was successfully challenged in court as lacking a sufficient legal basis, only to be reinstated by the District Commissioners in 1887. “No person... shall make... any noise or outcry for the purpose of advertising wares...” Some annoyed residents considered the rule a dead letter almost immediately as police were reluctant to take complaints against noise that a court might not find excessive.

But a continuing battle over implementation of the regulation drew out all sides of the argument. The haters marshaled the support of “eminent physicians” who declared the noise of traffic and hucksters enervating to children. They were supported, sometimes surreptitiously, by shop owners who resented the competition.

On the other hand, a home-maker’s full-throated defense of hucksters appeared in the *National Republican* in the early 1880s:

The man who has paid a license to the government for the privilege of selling... on the street, is particularly deprived of the value of his license if he cannot call out his wares. To ring the bell of every house and wait for its answer would consume so much time that he could earn no profit for his labor, while to the housekeepers obliged to answer such bells, the nuisance would be intolerable. In a warm climate it is necessary to purchase little at a time and often, and to drive hucksters from the streets and compel the housekeeper to go the market every time she desires fruit and oysters fresh would be an intolerable burden.⁵⁹

Persuaded by such appeals were the moderates: “Now, I agree that it is not necessary, in order to advertise your goods, that you should do so in a sing-song fashion, or to holloa in a voice loud enough to be heard for miles; but it is necessary that you should proclaim what you have for sale in a voice sufficiently loud to be heard; and to deprive these poor but honest men of this right is a hardship that should not be tolerated.”⁶⁰

A final position was represented by the correspondent of a New York newspaper who, in that city’s tougher-than-thou fashion, averred that denizens of Gotham had it much worse.

⁵⁹ “A Plea for Hawkers”, *The National Republican*, June 2, 1880.

⁶⁰ “The Loud Howling Huckster”, *The Washington Post*, June 6, 1881.

At the turn of the century, another New York paper envisioned an ideal city of the future, a quiet one, where residents and their elected leaders would “moderate” the many “tumultuous sounds”, especially the “street cries of ear-splitting shrillness” by which peddlers hawked their wares. Congress had recently authorized the District’s commissioners to enact and enforce any reasonable regulations for the sake of public health, safety and general welfare, and street cries had thus been duly restricted. An 1897-1898 effort to amend and enforce these regulations entailed the silencing of newsboys on Sundays and a complete ban on other street cries. While acknowledging the contradiction of licensing hawkers and then forbidding them to announce their presence, the Commissioners were reluctant to withdraw their order. To the hucksters, it seemed the end of their livelihood. But the Police Court continued to hold that moderate volume—in one case, a strawberry vendor’s call heard across a block—was reasonable and legal.

But the war was not over. The peddlers banded together and lawyered up to combat reinvigorated enforcement efforts in 1903 and 1905. A spate of arrests also had the wholesale commission merchants protesting the lack of business from street vendors. Representatives of the Northeast Citizens’ Association testified that its neighborhood could not get along without hucksters—who could hardly be expected to ring each and every doorbell. The Commissioners were sympathetic, but ultimately unmoved.

There was an element of racism to the noise complaints; one resident testified that,

the race to which most of the hucksters belong possess a peculiar characteristic, that of voices with remarkable carrying quality. ‘It’s a most admirable quality for an orator... but very obnoxious for a huckster.’ He spoke of the scores of sick who were disturbed by the cries, and added that the residents regard almost with affection the Commissioners for the stand they had taken... and urged them to stand by their guns...

As early as 1903, habitual visitors to the city noted the disappearance of familiar cries. Four years later, the *Evening Star* celebrated the success in nearly eradicating them—along with various visual and olfactory nuisances—by “endless endeavor”.

As we have seen, peddlers had their fans. In addition to those who valued the convenience of buying food at their doorstep, there were those who enjoyed them as expressions of folk culture and the vibrancy of the city. As early as the eighteenth century, Londoners had recorded the cries and even the likenesses of their hucksters as little sociological sketches. That metropolis’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century residents fondly recapitulated Georgian-era and Tudor-era cries in multiple media.

From Paris, too, and from the many stops on the Grand Tour came reports of the street cries, the colorful atmospherics of exotic climes. This sentiment typically did not spare them from being regulated away eventually, but it was responsible for preserving some in sound recordings and books during the early decades of the twentieth century.

As the American metropolis, New York received the most scrutiny of its working poor and was known for the longevity and variety of street cries—until they were banned in 1908. Still, some persisted, especially in Harlem. The South held its own, with a predominantly African-American and immigrant pool of hawkers. In 1910, Harriette Leiding documented Charleston's living *Street Cries of an Old Southern City*, legitimizing for white audiences African-American work songs. By 1934 that city had staged a vocalizing contest among its remaining hucksters. While composing his modern opera *Porgy and Bess* in the early 1930s, George Gershwin sojourned in Charleston to develop an ear for the sounds of the South. To mark the passing of a day in his show's third act, he wove together the calls of a "strawberry woman" and a "crab man", similar to those that would have been familiar to Washingtonians more than three decades earlier.⁶¹ At the same time, the Depression-era Federal Writers' Project took the field, recording street cries alongside other folk songs nationwide.

In the 1920s, Washington's Helen Nicolay chided sentimentalists and grumps who "bewail[ed] the passing of old Washington... [I]t is not likely they would be overjoyed to see it return.... Gone with jingling horse-car bells are many of the old street cries."⁶² But Washington, too, had its admirers of chanted pitches even while they were current. Alfred Noland's oysterman song was, at least to one Civil War-era Alexandrian, a fond memory of some supposed golden age of slavery. In early 1877, members of Washington's Artists' Club were assigned to sketch personified street cries for one monthly meeting. One eccentric approached the director of the Marine Band hoping to rescue the calls by harmonizing them and giving the sellers vocal training! A tongue-in-cheek appreciation by the *Washington Post* editors expressed their hometown pride. "We will not deny that other cities have louder noises than ours.... But in the far more important matters of variety and sweetness this city brooks no rivalry and proudly defies comparison.... Our hucksters study to please. They have various metrical arrangements of the names and qualities of their goods."⁶³ In the late 1910s, Ed Droop commenced his short-lived column, setting down the scores and circumstances of cries long past. Periodic newspaper items would reminisce about them until the late 1950s, when few remained alive who remembered. By then, the blatant fact of blaring car radios had supplanted distress over the unamplified voice.

⁶¹ [youtube.com/watch?v=EAUD5sMHHNQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAUD5sMHHNQ).

⁶² Nicolay, p. 518.

⁶³ "Street Noise", *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1895.

Forgotten but not gone

Laws did not wholly banish hawkers' cries to sports stadiums and carnivals,⁶⁴ any more than street vendors disappeared, some opening stands, others piloting trucks. Contradicting with most other accounts, Helen Nicolay suggests that "Fresh strawberries!" somehow persisted into the 1920s. Robert Shackleton's 1922 tour book seems anachronistic when it describes fish and coal dealers calling in the humbler neighborhoods, but Thomas Parker was "pinched" in 1921 for crying "salt water trout" while hauling a string of them. Now that hucksters were rare, the court again "decided that [he] had the right to sell his fish and advertise them as well, but instructed him in the future to modulate his voice somewhat."⁶⁵



*A fruit vendor on 17th Street NW, 1921. Harris and Ewing Collection, Library of Congress.
"The wagons display amazing Greek names of rolling syllables, and proud charioteers."*

⁶⁴ The Library of Congress Radio Research Project recorded barkers from the James E. Strates carnival in spring 1941, but as traveling showmen, they can be said only to have been *at* Washington, and not *of* the Washington streets.

⁶⁵ "Loud Voice No Crime", *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1921.

Less objectionable in male-dominated sports arenas, vendors' cries seeped back to the streets in the modern era. After military service in Korea, Marcus Johnson took a job selling peanuts at football and baseball games at D.C. Stadium, in the years before it was renamed for the late Bobby Kennedy. He soon branched into other products, crooning "get your nutritious, delicious hot dogs"⁶⁶ in a deep voice. "Now is the time to eat, drink and be merry! Get your ice cold drinks from me. Make the ladies happy, make the children happy, get your ice cold drinks from me. There is still time to eat, drink and be merry!"⁶⁷ But the sports calendar left spare time to worry how to pad the income. Johnson was performing odd jobs when he devised another way to amuse children: hawking balloons on the street. African-American, like so many of his predecessors, and sporting a suit jacket (or several, layered), he also wore sunglasses—which made some passersby assume he was blind. The balloon man would set up evenings at 7th and F streets NW until the 1968 riots. He then could be spotted farther west at 19th and M. He made appearances at the National Zoo, too, but was best known on Georgetown's stretch of Wisconsin Avenue, typically in front of the Little Tavern at N Street, but also a regular at the flea market several blocks north. An impractical and ephemeral children's toy benefited from a little salesmanship to make adults part with their money, so Johnson varied his patter:

Hey diddle-diddle, Jack and Jill, make the children happy. Make the little ladies smile.⁶⁸

They are big, can they are beau-ti-ful, the beautiful balloons, with LOVE and DAISIES, to decorate! They make the ladies hap-py, make the children hap-py! When you make the lit-tle ones hap-py, then everyone's hap-py! PICK them up, GET them now. Don't forget to make the lit-tle ones hap-py! They are big, they are beau-ti-ful, the beautiful balloons... [Only a buck.]"⁶⁹

"His cry could go in an instant from a deep basso to an attention-grabbing falsetto: 'Balloons, big beautiful balloons! Buy one for the ladies, make the ladies happy! Buy one for the little ones, make the little ones happy! When the little ones are happy, evvvvrrybody's happy!'"⁷⁰

There were those who surmised that the innocent-looking business must front for something. Some thought Johnson was undercover police—and more, that he sold

⁶⁶ John Zeller, comment on post on "Old Time D.C." Facebook page, September 17, 2015.

⁶⁷ John Kelly, "The Balloon Man of Georgetown deserved his inflated reputation", *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2018.

⁶⁸ Christopher Rose, "Corner Balloon Man Inflates Spirits, Too", *The Washington Post*, March 1, 1984.

⁶⁹ Mark Gallagher, post on "Old Time D.C." Facebook page, September 17, 2015; Rose.

⁷⁰ Kelly.

drugs. But no one could pin something so dastardly on the cheerful balloon man, who has since himself flown heavenward. There *was* that occasion when a columnist ran across a similar rhymester outside George Washington University vending items suited to the Studio 54 era: “‘Our prices are lower so you can get higher!’, ‘Our paraphernalia will never failia’ and ‘Don’t be without a mirror and spoon on a cold winter afternoon!’”⁷¹ The newspaperman’s conclusion: not your father’s street huckster. These days, too, are gone.

Today, one must attend an event at one of Washington’s off-street sports venues to hear the plainest of vendors’ cries, a wan reflection of a rich, predominantly African-American folk culture of itinerant commerce. Perhaps, while occasionally offering samples, a worker at the venerable 7th Street wharf revives for a moment the ghosts of the peripatetic fishmongers of centuries past. Now, even

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee⁷²



*Marcus Johnson, the beloved
Georgetown balloon man, 1978.
Copyright David Blackwell,
photographer.
Courtesy of Mr. Blackwell and
the Library of Congress.*

⁷¹ “The Ear”, *The Washington Star*, January 17, 1981.

⁷² E.E. Cummings, “in Just-”, 1920.