

GIS Newsletter Article

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Music in the American Revolution

(The Girl I Left Behind Me)

Many of the songs from the 18th century are shrouded within contradictory folklore regarding the song's origins and composers. The "Girl I Left Behind Me" is no exception. Some sources state the tune was popular as far back as Queen Elizabeth's (Elizabeth I) reign. Another story is that the tune originated in 1758 when Admirals Hawke and Rodney were watching the French fleet off the coast at Brighton.¹ Additionally Theodore Ralph wrote that the tune was known in America as early as 1650 and indicated it was a traditional fife tune, imported from England as *Brighten Camp*.² Still others claim it is an old Irish tune, not English. Even the first extant printing of the song is in dispute, although most historians and musicologists at least agree that the most likely date of printing is in the 1790s. Despite the disagreement on the date of printing, almost all agree that the song is much older than the 1790s printing and predates the American Revolution. William Chappell referenced a manuscript of the song in the possession of Edward Rimbault who himself claimed the manuscript dates from the 1770s.³ Just to confuse the matter even more, no additional references to this manuscript have been made. Lastly, the song is known by several different names The Girl I Left Behind Me, Girl I Left Behind, Brighton Camp, and Brighton Boys, but again various musicologists will state these names belong to significantly different tunes.

William Chappell dated the song as originating in 1758 based on the fifth line of the second stanza which states "*But now I'm bound to Brighton camp*". During the period of 1758-1759 a series of military encampments were established along the coast of England around Brighton. The camps were built in anticipation of a French invasion during the Seven Year War (aka French and Indian War). This would coincide with the time and place in which Admirals Hawke and Rodney were at Brighton.

Regardless of its origin, the tune became popular during the American Revolution. During this period the lyrics underwent several modifications to fit various situations and contexts as did numerous other songs of the period. One factor adding to its popularity is that the tune can be played with a variety of instruments and is easily adapted to various musical styles and interpretations.

The lyrics of The Girl I Left Behind Me during the American Revolution tell the story of a man who leaves his beloved behind as he sets off on a journey, possibly related to military service. The song is often associated with soldiers and sailors, who would sing it as they left their homes and loved ones to go to war or to embark on a voyage. However, the song's themes of love, loss, and longing provide a sentimental connection for anyone who has had to leave a beloved one.

One of the earliest versions of the song can be found in Ireland, where it was known as 'Brighton Camp'. It was also popular in England, where it was known as 'Brighton Camp,' 'Brighton Boys,' or 'The Girl I Left Behind Me'. The tune has a lively and upbeat melody, appropriate for a marching song. Although the song is typically played in a quick upbeat manner, it can also be played at a slower tempo. When played slowly, the mood of the song changes from an uplifting march to

somber, almost mournful. This variation in mood is one aspect of *The Girl I Left Behind Me* which makes it unique for its period.

Over the years, *The Girl I Left Behind Me* has been recorded and performed by numerous artists, including country singers, folk musicians, and even rock bands. Each rendition adds a unique touch to the song, while still keeping its original charm intact. The lyrics provided below are believed to be those most commonly used during the American Revolution.

The Girl I Left Behind Me

I'm lonesome since I crossed the hill,
And o'er the moorland sedgy
Such heavy thoughts my heart do fill,
Since parting with my Betsey
I seek for one as fair and gay,
But find none to remind me
How sweet the hours I passed away,
With the girl I left behind me.

O ne'er shall I forget the night,
the stars were bright above me
And gently lent their silv'ry light
when first she vowed to love me
But now I'm bound to Brighton camp
kind heaven then pray guide me
And send me safely back again,
to the girl I left behind me

Her golden hair in ringlets fair,
her eyes like diamonds shining
Her slender waist, her heavenly face,
that leaves my heart still pining
Ye gods above oh hear my prayer
to my beauteous fair to find me
And send me safely back again,
to the girl I left behind me

The bee shall honey taste no more,
the dove become a ranger
The falling waters cease to roar,
ere I shall seek to change her
The vows we made to heav'n above
shall ever cheer and bind me
In constancy to her I love,
the girl I left behind me.

¹ Linscott, Eloise Hubbard, *Folk Songs of Old New England*, Dover Publications, New York, 1993 (First published in 1939).

² Ralph, Theodore, *American Song Treasury*, Dover 1964.

³ Chappell, Edward, *Popular Music of the Olden Times; A Collection of Ancient Songs, Ballads, and Dance Tunes, Illustrative of the National Music of England*, Volume II, Cramer, Beale, and Chappell, London, pg. 708.