



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### **America's first protest singers: The Hutchinson Family**

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A recent "Out of the Attic" column noted that the famous and influential Hutchinson family never performed at Lyceum Hall (now The Lyceum, Alexandria's History Museum). An Alexandria Gazette reader even lamented in 1844 that there were too many minstrel shows and wished to no avail that the Hutchinson family would perform instead.

It turns out, however, that the Hutchinsons actually did sing at Lyceum Hall, and also at the Southern Methodist Church, now Washington Street Methodist Church, though they performed more than a decade after their heyday and with only one original member.

John, Asa, Jesse and Judson Hutchinson – four of 16 siblings – formed the Hutchinson Family Singers in 1840 in the midst of a popular tour by the Rainer family of Austria. The Rainer family wore lederhosen, yodeled and performed traditional alpine songs in four-part harmony. They also published their songs – making the music more accessible to American audiences than those of previous European touring groups.

The Hutchinsons began by performing mostly European songs by the Rainers and popular songwriters such as Henry Russell. The Rainer Family and Henry Russell also performed at Lyceum Hall over the years.

Soon, however, the Hutchinsons began performing original material. Jesse stopped performing to write songs and manage the group as they toured New England and Great Britain. Sister Abby replaced Jesse and took over the high tenor in the fourpart harmony singing. The Hutchinsons became the first truly American popular singing group. They popularized harmony singing, and they influenced several other family bands that sprang up in their wake. The Hutchinsons set themselves apart from other acts, however, by also becoming America's first protest singers. They sang songs promoting worker's rights, temperance, women's rights and better treatment of the mentally ill. And they were abolitionists. Early on they garnered both support and controversy with their anti-slavery song "Get Off the Track!" that they set to the tune of the popular minstrel song "Old Dan Tucker."

The Hutchinsons were enormously popular through the 1840s. Abby left the group at the end of the decade, and while the brothers continued performing, they were not as popular as before. Judson committed suicide in 1859, and by the time the Civil War began, John and Asa each led two different "tribes" of the family singers. During the war, John's branch of the family singers – John, his children, and bass-singing friend Frank Martin – came to the Washington D.C. area to entertain troops and boost morale. Abraham Lincoln was a fan, and the Hutchinsons performed at The White House during this trip. In January 1862, they were given a pass to cross over into occupied portions of Virginia to perform, and there they ran into some controversy at the Fairfax Seminary.

While performing for a regiment from New Jersey, they sang a musical rendition of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "We Wait Beneath the Furnace Blast" – an anti-slavery song that contains the lyrics "Let Slavery die! And union find a freedom!" The song drew boos from some of the New Jersey troops, and the performance of the song ultimately led General McClellan, who opposed federal intervention into slavery, to ban the Hutchinsons from singing. John Hutchinson, in his 1896 memoir, noted that "Of course, we were aware that the army of the Union did not entirely consist of Abolitionists."



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President Lincoln wanted the troops to hear such songs, however, and a week later the Hutchinsons were given permission to sing for the troops in Alexandria. They sang at the Southern Methodist Church, and John later noted, "We sang our 'prohibited' song, it being loudly called for, and also many other radical songs, among them 'John Brown's Body.'" The Local News advertised that they also performed at Lyceum Hall on Thursday, Jan. 23. The Hutchinson Family thus weathered the controversy and did, indeed, perform in Alexandria. After the war, both branches of the family continued singing even as musical trends and tastes changed.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

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