

## TAJ MAHAL/GIANT STEP



Album cover of the 1969 Taj Mahal record that contains a song born in West Virginia. Columbia Records

## "ARISTOCRACY" OF PRESTON COUNTY

by Eric Waggoner,  
Executive Director

I'm not a terrific banjo player. While dependable with guitar and mandolin, my banjo playing could most sympathetically be described as "earnest," insofar as I know a handful of chords and make some of the intended noises when I hit the instrument.

Still, there's a lot of fun to be had as a rank amateur. When I pick up the banjo, it's in the service of nothing more than pleasing myself—as the cat, babies, and dear wife can attest. This was how I was improving the hours last weekend, quietly playing through "Colored Aristocracy," a short and relatively uncomplicated tune I've loved for many years. After a few idle passes at the melody it occurred to me that I didn't really know anything at all about the song, a startling discovery considering how long I've enjoyed it. A Saturday morning mystery was calling.

Traditional musicians and musicologists will already have seen where this is going. But imagine my rankly amateurish surprise to learn that this song I first encountered almost three decades ago while living in Arizona has one of its major roots right here in West Virginia.

And yet, I suspect I first heard the song the way most people my age did, through Taj Mahal's outstanding 1969 double album *Giant Step/De Ole Folks At Home* (Columbia Records). The first disc of this release was devoted to the tradition-centered vein Mahal had mined on his previous two albums, both of which blended electric and traditional blues in thrilling conversation with each other. However, the second disc was a true wonder, to me anyway: a collection of 13 stripped-down acoustic tunes, some traditional and some original, performed on a variety of stringed instruments, with Mahal's singing front and center in the mix.

Mahal is perfectly capable of clean, pristine performances: "Leaving Trunk," from his first album, is one of the most technically perfect blues performances I've ever heard. But here in 1969, by contrast, there were missed notes, single notes inside a run that clanged too quickly and too loudly, the soft scratch of Mahal's fingernails scraping the banjo head as he strummed...all of the individual performative elements of Mahal's playing were set right up front, uncorrected or even much softened in the mixing process, existing as part of the true fabric of the song.

He had made the song his own. But "Colored Aristocracy" hadn't started life in Mahal's capable hands. Where had it come from?

According to the earliest available records the song, or at least a song under that title, appears to emerge from the pre-ragtime "cakewalk" tradition. That turn-of-the-century version's history involves all manner of important artists, such as Harlem Renaissance luminary and NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson. The song title's origins are a matter of debate. The only thing we know for sure is that the first use of the term "Colored Aristocracy" appears as the title of an 1858 book by "a mixed-race [St. Louis, Missouri] resident named Cyprian Clamorgan, [which] documented the lives of the city's most prominent free Blacks," according to the National Park Service.

But the version performed by Taj Mahal on his 1969 record—indeed, the version most every contemporary traditional player now knows—is based on a single performance of the tune by West Virginia fiddler Sanford Rich. That performance took place in Arthurdale, Preston County, in 1936, and was recorded by musicologist Charles Seeger (father of Mike and Pete Seeger) for the Library of Congress.

Hailing from a coal community just south of Morgantown, the Rich family—including Sanford and his nephew Elmer, who would later become a first-rate old-time fiddler himself—were invited to perform in Arthurdale for visiting First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, whose support of and personal interest in the unincorporated town made it an especially visible example of the Roosevelt administration's social policy responses to the Great Depression.

As preserved on that Library of Congress recording (a transcription is available online via the LOC under file number "AFS 3306 B2"), Sanford Rich played the tune in the key of G, the standard tuning for modern performances. Most recordings of the song now available, including Taj Mahal's, use E minor as the second chord. Indeed, Charles Seeger's son Mike, as a founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers, played this progression on that band's debut album, released in 1958.

More variations followed. The Spark Gap Mountain Boys' rendition on their 1972 album *Cluck Old Hen* uses E major as the second chord. The E major option fits the speedy feel of the tune, and the SGMBs execute it well. But to this set of ears, anyway, E minor, as selected by the Ramblers and Taj Mahal, adds just the barest melancholy undercurrent to

(continued on back)

Two of the Sandy Creek Expedition's key figures: Major Andrew Lewis (left) and Outacite Ostenaco. Ostenaco's portrait was drawn only a few years after the expedition, whereas this fanciful rendition of Lewis was replicated from a statue in Richmond, Virginia., commissioned over a century after his death. Public domain images



## SHADOWS OF WAR

### TRACING THE 1756 SANDY CREEK EXPEDITION

by Kyle Warmack,  
Program Officer

In the chill days of early March, it was my privilege to fall in with a small, hardy band retracing the route of the French and Indian War's Sandy Creek Expedition over the course of two days. Of course, it was also a privilege to make the weekend trip by car over paved roads, as opposed to slogging it on foot for two weeks through ceaseless rain, as had the original combined force of Cherokee and Virginia militia on their ill-fated military adventure against Shawnee villages along the Ohio River.

Intrepidly led by Doug Wood—one of the state's foremost living experts on this rich period of frontier conflict—we began near Wytheville, Virginia, and wound our way gradually north into McDowell County, West Virginia. "Sandy Creek" was the name applied at the time of the expedition to the Dry Fork, Tug Fork, and Sandy River corridor. Our journey along this route eventually terminated in Wharncliffe, Mingo County, where the expedition had ignominiously disbanded when the Virginians, starving and exhausted, turned back, refusing to follow their officers any further into the mountainous wilds.

In the shadow of momentous events like the 1774 Battle of Point Pleasant, commemorating its 250th anniversary this year—not to mention the nation's upcoming 250th birthday in 2026—why should we care about a forlorn group of Virginians starving in the woods far from the enemies they'd marched out to fight, years before the Revolution? Doug Wood unfolded the Sandy Creek Expedition's intriguing historical ties as we progressed along the campaign route and thoroughly made the case for a degree of national importance.

For one thing, there's the cast of characters, led prominently by Major Andrew Lewis and Cherokee war leader Outacite Ostenaco. Ostenaco is an omnipresent figure in the years preceding the American Revolution, somehow appearing in the unlikeliest

(continued on back)

**"ARISTOCRACY" OF PRESTON COUNTY**

*(continued from front)*

the tune, a progression that sounds natural and makes the repeated return to the tonic chord feel gentler, even reassuring.

Sanford Rich's nephew Elmer was just 16 when he, his father and brother, and his uncle played for Eleanor Roosevelt in Arthurdale. In 2008, a much older Elmer Rich took the stage at the WVU Mountaineer Week fiddle contest. During his set he told that story, and played the song himself, with guitar accompaniment (including the E minor second chord).

Many musicians have said—I think I first heard it expressed by one of the Marsalis brothers—that the true incarnation of the so-called American "melting pot" wasn't to be found in its policy or its law, but rather in its music. Musical styles, techniques, phrasings, even entire tunes and songs, pass over and around every barrier they encounter, every attempt to separate communities of people, perpetuating themselves across time and leaping from one population to another, and another, with a success rate of 100%.

We know that, intuitively, more or less. But even on a lazy Saturday morning, it's a lovely lesson to learn again. And again and again, lest we forget it.

Elmer Rich passed away in 2015 on June 20—West Virginia Day—at the age of 95. Taj Mahal, born in Harlem, New York, in 1942, turns 82 this year, and is still making and releasing music.

*Elmer Rich's live 2008 performance of "Colored Aristocracy" referenced above is viewable on YouTube.*

**First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (fourth from left) visits Arthurdale in September 1936 for a 4-H baking demonstration. From right to left, according to notes on the back of the photograph: Grace Pharr, Elwin Riley, Analee Whetsell, Dorothy Braun, Clarabelle Miller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady [Stella] Reading, Mrs. T.R. Pharr, and Miss Elena Hoard. Courtesy of Arthurdale Heritage, Inc.**



**SHADOWS OF WAR**

*(continued from front)*

of places to negotiate treaties or lead military campaigns—equal parts tactician and diplomat. Lewis, who would finally get another crack (successfully this time) at the Shawnee during Dunmore's War in 1774, was a relatively inexperienced commander in 1756, and learned from his many mistakes on Sandy Creek. He carefully observed the campaign craft of the 130 Cherokee leading the way forward, absorbing lessons that would serve him well the following decade during Dunmore's War and the Battle of Point Pleasant, through his American Revolution service. Several of Lewis's officers would also walk away from Sandy Creek having taken similar observations to heart.

This was a substantial improvement in colonial attitudes, given the expedition's origins. The whole *raison d'être* of the march was to expunge the shame of Braddock's Defeat the year before, when British failure to appreciate the tactical savvy and discipline of a mostly Indian opposing force led to bloody disaster near the banks of Monongahela (1755). Emboldened by the success of the French-allied tribes, Shawnee war parties began relentlessly raiding Virginia border settlements. One such raid led to the now-famous capture of Mary Draper Ingles. To restore the morale of their British allies, the Cherokee proposed a lightning raid through unprotected present-day West Virginia, bypassing French forts to hit a cluster of French-allied Shawnee villages on the Ohio River.

It didn't work out as planned. Rather than take Cherokee advice and attach a few officers to a mobile Cherokee raiding force, 210 Virginia militiamen soon mustered for what became a ponderous, underfed, waterlogged march into the labyrinth of mountains that comprise present-day McDowell County. It was an experience those men—many of whom had future parts to play in the fight for independence from British rule—would not soon forget. Despite early ruptures, however, the Cherokee contingent forged closer bonds with the Virginians over the course of the expedition, strengthening their alliance with the British for the coming years of war with the French.

Thankfully, we don't all have to hitch a ride with Doug Wood to experience Sandy Creek in person (since he doesn't have seats or gas for everyone). Six interpretive markers, funded in part by a West Virginia Humanities Council grant, highlight key spots along the route in Berwind, Bradshaw, Jaeger, Panther State Park, and Warriormine. An excellent website explains the history in depth. You can chase these sources with a healthy dose of online *West Virginia Encyclopedia* articles, too. It all makes for an excellent primer for the Dunmore's War 250th—and it's not a bad refresher for the nation's approaching semiquincentennial, too.

[www.sandycreektour.com](http://www.sandycreektour.com)  
<https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/175>

**Doug Wood is now portraying Thomas Ingles for the History Alive! roster. Thomas was the son of William and Mary Draper Ingles, and was still a captive of the Shawnee at the time of the Sandy Creek Expedition—upon which his father served as a lieutenant. Mary had escaped and returned to Virginia the year before. Thomas Ingles was raised to adulthood by an adopted Shawnee family before relatives negotiated his repatriation to Virginia. Keep your eyes open for Thomas Ingles History Alive! presentations this year!**

**EVENTS APRIL-MAY 2024**

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Until Apr 22</b> <b>Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit at Historic Black Knight Municipal Park, Beckley. Open during regular public hours.</b></p> <p><b>Apr 5</b> <b>Minnie Reed - History Alive!, Canaan Valley Lodge, Davis. 8pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 6</b> <b>Walt Disney - History Alive!, Calhoun County Public Library, Grantsville. 3pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 6</b> <b>Frances Perkins - presented by the Great Bend Museum, Alpine Theatre, Ripley. 5pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 11</b> <b>The Great Dissenter: The Story of John Marshall Harlan, America's Judicial Hero- Amicus Curiae lecture by author Peter S. Canellos, Erickson Alumni Center, Marshall University, Huntington. 7pm</b></p> | <p><b>Apr 17</b> <b>Davis &amp; Elkins College, Elkins - 7pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 18</b> <b>Fairmont State University, Fairmont - 7:30pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 19</b> <b>Christ Church United Methodist, Charleston - 7pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 20</b> <b>Carnegie Hall, Lewisburg - 7pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 21</b> <b>Henderson Hall, Williamson - 2:30pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 20</b> <b>Thomas Ingles, Dunmore's War 250th - History Alive!, Tomlinson Run State Park 4pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 22</b> <b>West Virginia National Cemeteries Project - Capstone ceremony celebrating veterans and student research, Taylor County Historical &amp; Genealogical Society building, Grafton. 4:30pm</b></p> | <p><b>Apr 25</b> <b>Minnie Reed - History Alive!, White Sulphur Springs Library, White Sulphur Springs. 6pm</b></p> <p><b>Apr 28</b> <b>Echoes of the War on Terror: Gaza through the Lens of American Military History - 2024 Little Lecture by Col. (Ret) Peter Mansoor, MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm</b></p> <p><b>May 4</b> <b>Agriculture and Industry Exhibit Opening - Arthurdale Heritage, Arthurdale. 4pm</b></p> <p><b>May 18</b> <b>The Battle of Matewan: A Window into History - Exhibit opening at the WV Mine Wars Museum, Matewan. 10am</b></p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved.  
 Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors.  
 Images used with permission. Additional graphics and linear obtained from Vecteezy.com.

1310 Kanawha Blvd. E  
 Charleston WV 25301  
 304.346.8500

West Virginia Humanities Council  
 BRIDGING TRADITION & TOMORROW

YEARS  
 1974-2024