

AMERICAN MINSTREL SHOW COLLECTION, 1823-1947

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library (USA)

Located in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, the American Minstrel Show Collection comprises 23 boxes of images of minstrel performers and troupes, playbills and programs of performances, and other miscellaneous materials concerning minstrel shows. A number of performers, troupes and associated practitioners within the collection had either a direct association with Australasia or were indirectly affiliated with the region's minstrel industry.



The collection is organised into the following series:

I. Images of American minstrel performers and troupes

- A. Minstrel images, A-Z
- B. Composite images of minstrels
- C. Unidentified images of minstrel troupes and individuals

II. American minstrel show playbills, A-Z

III. Other materials concerning American minstrel shows

The images are of individual minstrel performers and troupes, primarily from American minstrel shows ca. 1830s to 1890s. A variety of formats are included: lithographs, photographs, a few etchings and cabinet photographs, printed clippings, photomechanical prints, 1 tintype, and others. Some prints are hand-colored and images depict performers both in character (in "blackface"), as well as in street clothes. For the most part, sheet music in this series is not complete, but are only covers that were collected for the images of the performers. This series also includes other materials such as photomechanical copies of playbills and broadsides, clippings with images and biographical text, some complete sheet music, programs, manuscripts, and drawings.



Charlie Backus
Toured Australia 1855-1856,
1859-1860



Billy Emerson toured Australia three times with various companies between 1873 and 1893

The playbill series includes "true" playbills (long sheets, printed on only one side), printed advertisements, programs (printed on both sides), and programs with sheet music. Also included are a few photomechanical reproductions of playbills.

Some important groups represented in this collection are: Bryant's Minstrels, Buckley's New Orleans Serenaders, Callender's Georgia Minstrels, Campbell's Minstrels, Christy's Minstrels, Ethiopian Serenaders, Haverly's Minstrels, Ordway's Æolian Vocalists, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, Virginia Minstrels, Virginia Serenaders, White's Minstrels, Wood's Minstrels, many female minstrel groups, as well as many others. This collection also includes materials for American troupes performing abroad. Names for the various groups often changed. The same group might be filed here under different names, depending on what was printed on the playbill or image.

Houghton Library is the primary repository for rare books and manuscripts at Harvard University. It is part of the Harvard College Library within the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Named after Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. (Harvard Class of 1929), who donated the largest share of the initial funding to build the library, Harvard became the first American university to construct a separate research facility for the housing and study of rare books and manuscripts. The Boston architectural firm of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn designed a classic neo-Georgian building, incorporating what was then state-of-the-art technology for climate control, air filtration, security, and the shelving of materials. After its official opening in 1942 the Library won several major architectural awards and became a model for other such research libraries.

The Houghton Library also holds collections of papers of many leading authors, politicians and notable individuals, including: Samuel Johnson, Emily Dickinson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Margaret Fuller, John Keats, Gore Vidal, Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family, Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May Alcott, along with the papers of other notable transcendentalists, Theodore Roosevelt, T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Henry James, William James, James Joyce, and John Updike.

For further information, including an online Finding Aid to the American Minstrels Show Collection (with direct access to digitised materials) click on the link below:

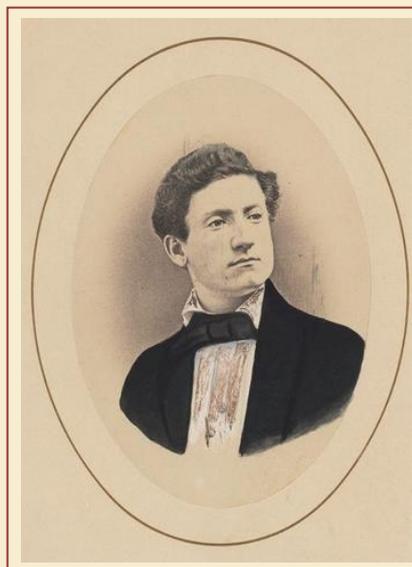
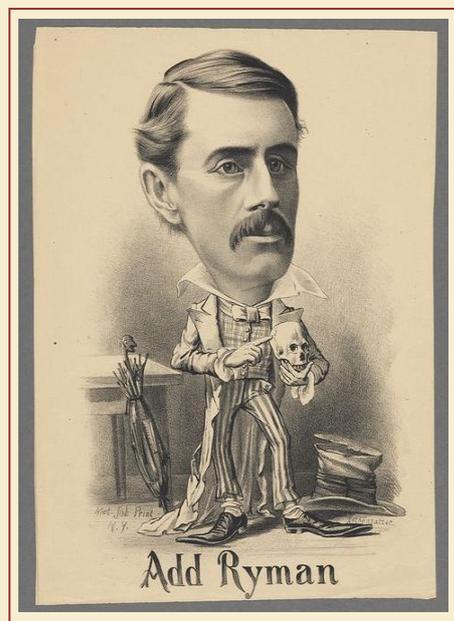
>> [American Minstrel Show Collection: Finding Aid](#) <<



Left: [Edwin Kelly](#) (ca. 1830-1900) and [Francis Leon](#) (1844-ca.1913) brought their company to Australia in 1878 for Hiscocks and Hayman. Prior to ending their partnership in 1880 the pair built and opened the Opera House in Sydney. Kelly remained in Australia for the rest of his life.

Right: [John Addison "Add" Ryman](#) (1837-1896) came to Australia in 1882 with Frank Clark (Clark and Ryman's Minstrels) and remained for some four years.

Below: [Jerry Bryant](#) (1828-1861) toured Australia in 1855 and 1856, first with the San Francisco Minstrels and then with Rainer's Serenaders and the Backus Minstrels.



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