



Slaves, Hillbillies, and Fine Young Ladies: The Banjo's Transition Into and Out Of Mainstream Society

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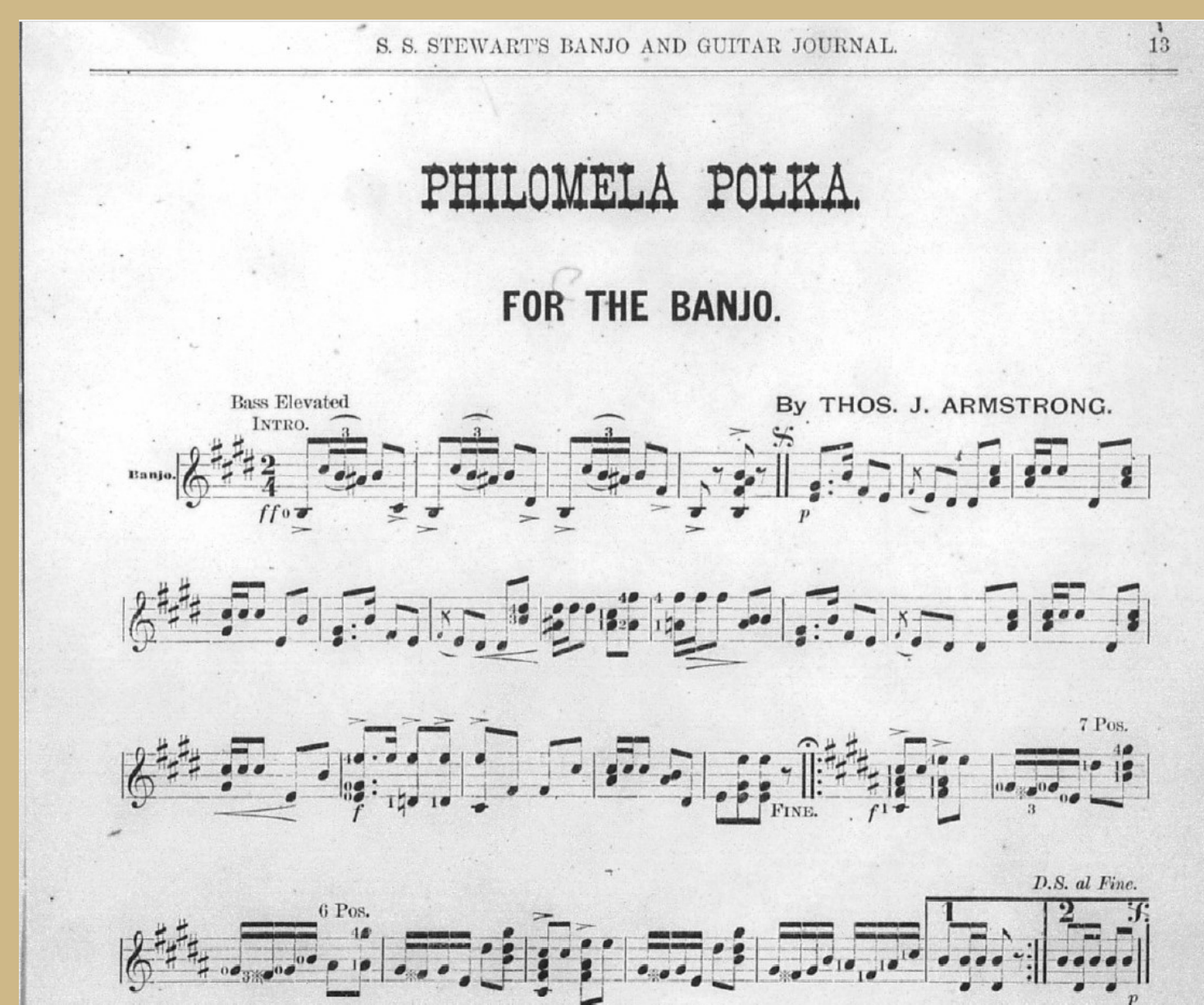
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Background

- Today, those who play the banjo are typically assumed to be white Americans from the rural South.
- Despite this popular image, the banjo was first created by African slaves in the Americas during the early eighteenth century, and was culturally associated with Black Americans until well after the Civil War.
- In both of these contexts, contemporary and historical, banjo players have been portrayed in a very similar way, always as poor, rural, and unsophisticated.

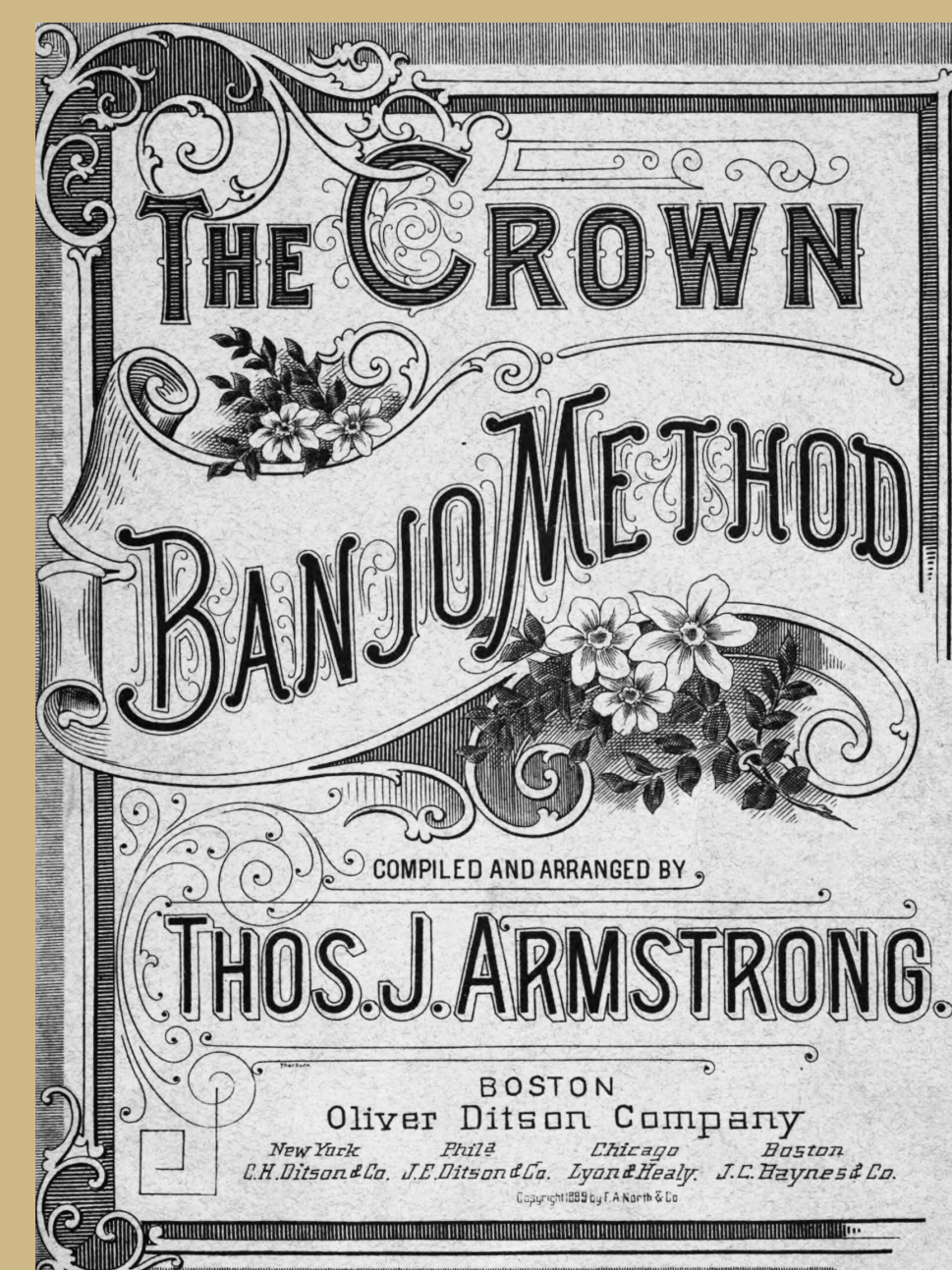
Abstract

From about 1880 to 1900, there was a major shift in public perceptions about the banjo. In this period, known as the Classic Banjo era, the banjo was considered a fashionable instrument in white upper and middle-class urban society in the United States. Although a growing body of research exists regarding the African origins of the banjo, the Classic Banjo remains understudied. Using relevant advertisements, method books, and newspaper and magazine articles published between 1880 and 1900, this project analyzes attempts to elevate the banjo's place in society, and the success of those endeavors.



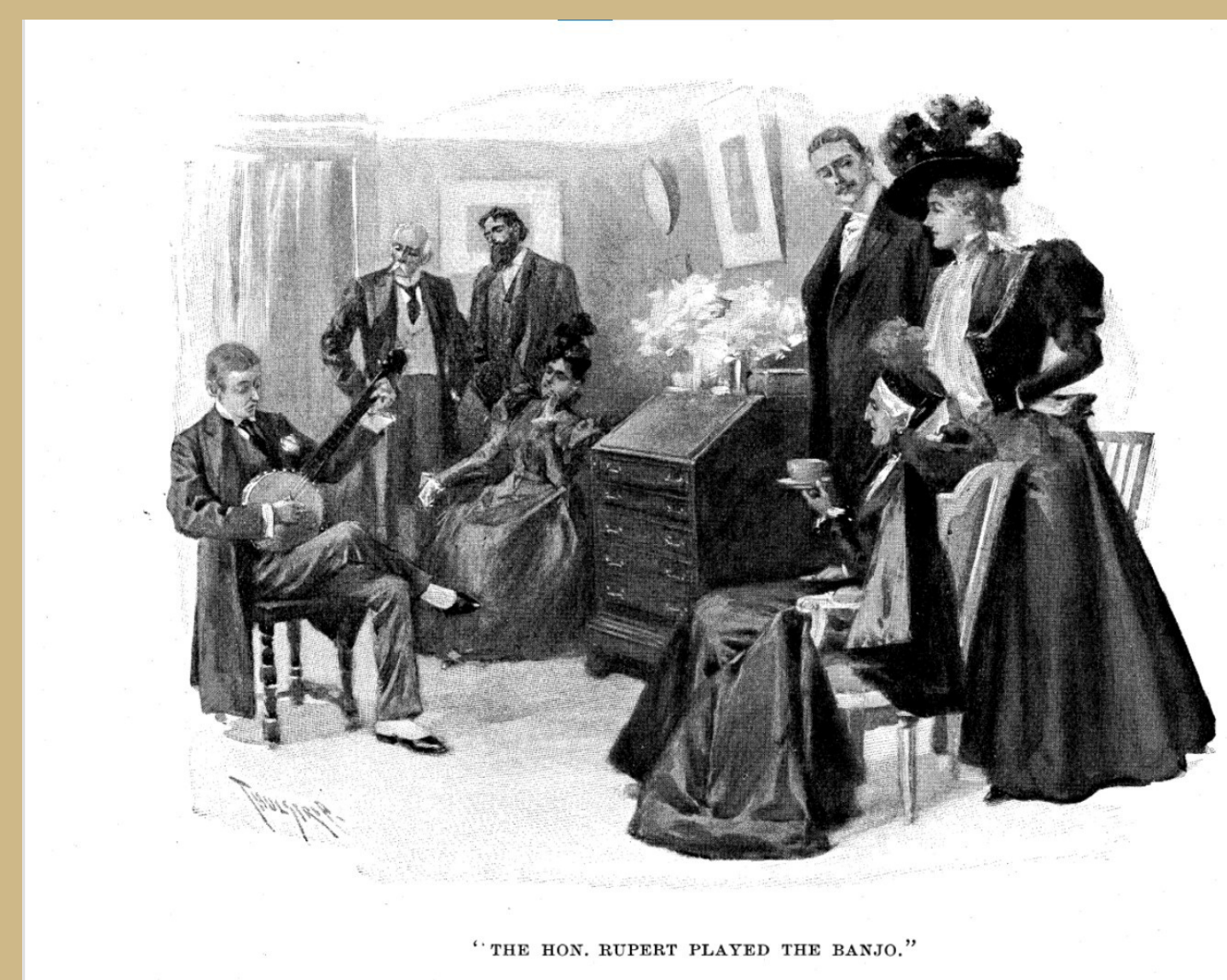
Above: Banjo solo, published in *S.S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal*, February 1893

Below: *The Crown Banjo Method* by Thomas Armstrong, 1889



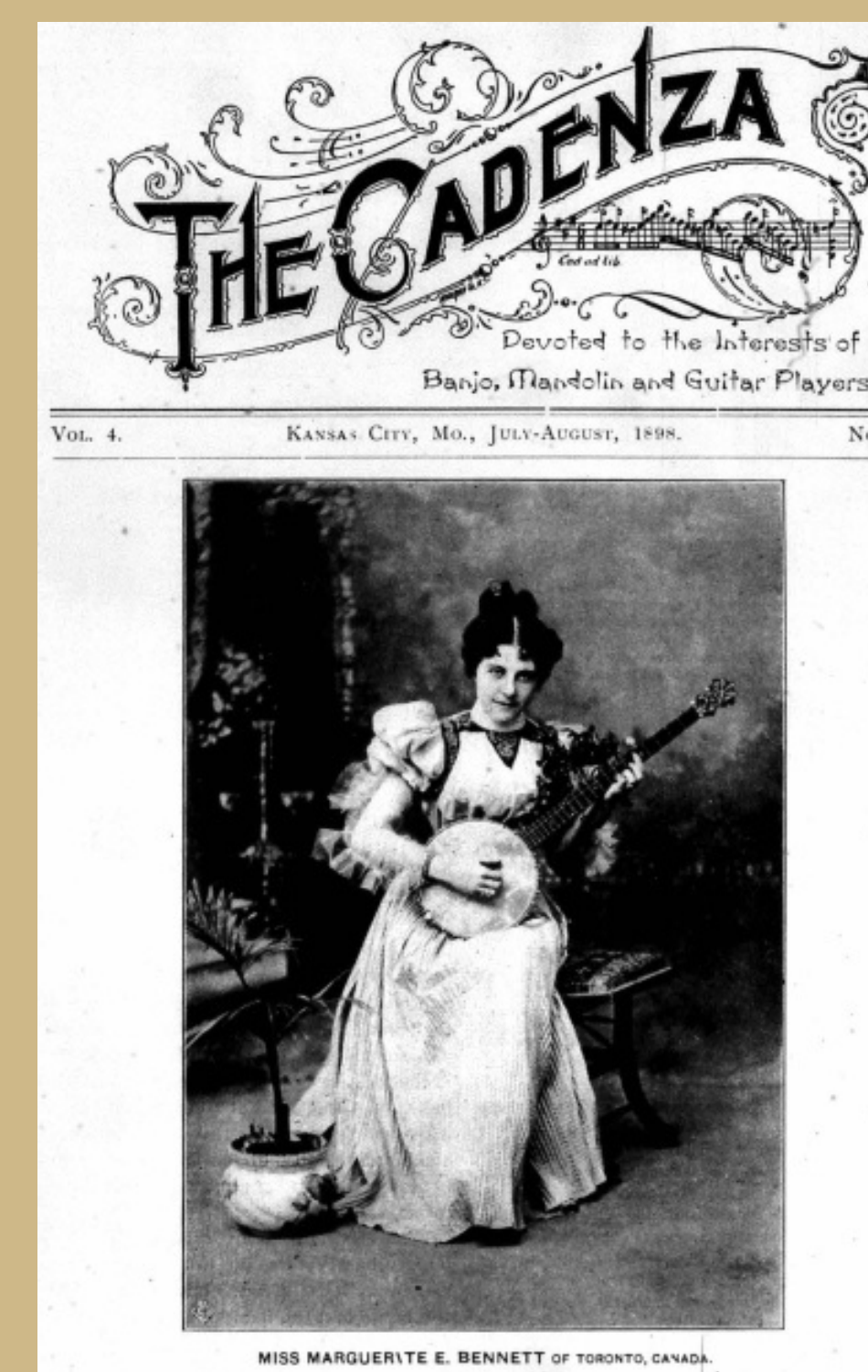
Methods

- Read modern secondary sources, discussing the Classic Banjo era
- Analyzed banjo-specific publications, to learn how the Classic Banjo was portrayed and promoted. Key publications used include *S. S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal*, and *Gatcomb's Gazette*
- Analyzed primary sources aimed at mainstream audiences in order to infer how the banjo was actually perceived by everyday people. Key publications used include *The Ladies Home Journal*, as well as local newspapers from throughout the United States.

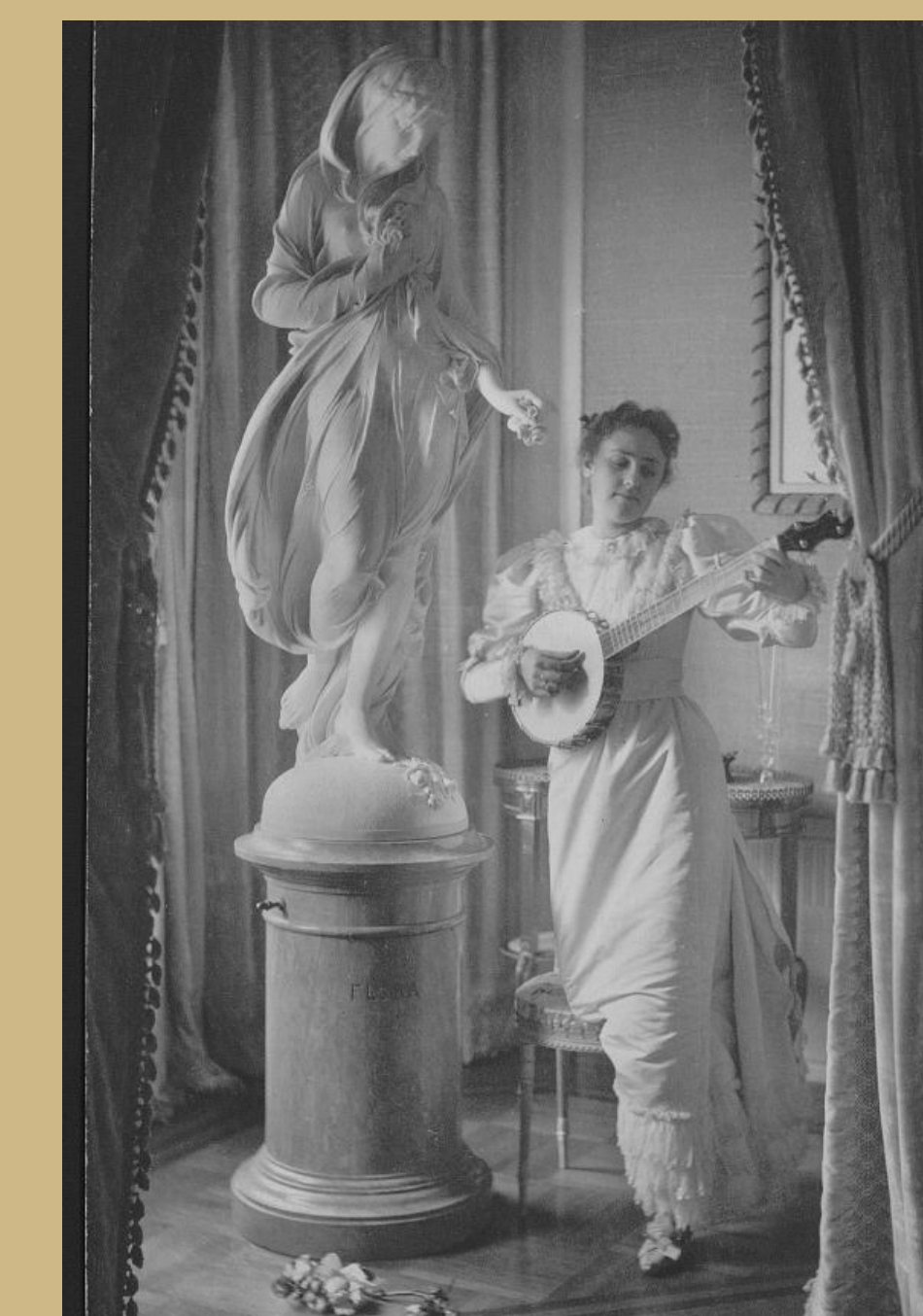


Above: Illustration from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1898

Below: Cover page of *The Cadenza* magazine, July 1898



Above: Mount Holyoke College Banjo Club, published in *The Ladies Home Journal* February 1902
Right: "Miss Apperson" playing banjo, Washington DC, 1895



Conclusions

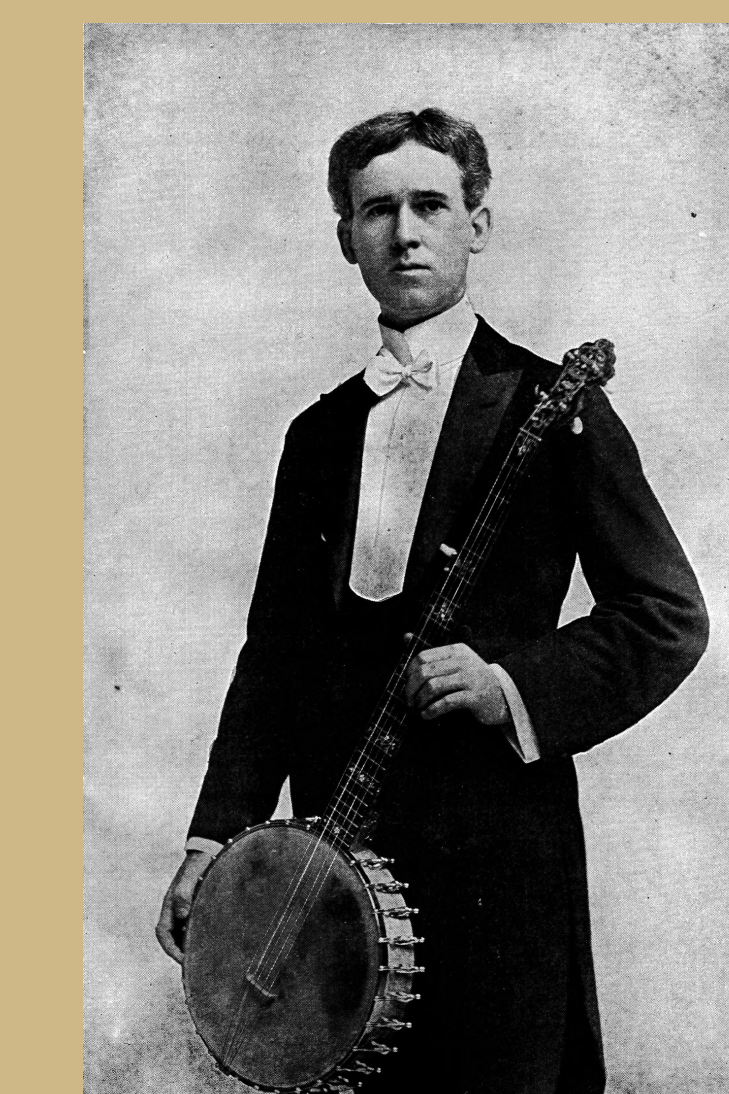
- The banjo's rise in status was not accidental, and can largely be attributed to a successful, unofficial advertising campaign undertaken by instrument manufacturers through their own published journals.
- This advertising used a variety of persuasion tactics, including telling complete lies, in order to rebrand the banjo as a proper, fashionable instrument.
- The banjo's new identity was well known in upper class society from 1880-1900, but it failed to permeate deeply into the culture, remaining a novelty fad that would quickly be forgotten.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my research mentor, Peregrin Shaeffer, who got me started on this whole banjo journey a year and a half ago. This project started as a simple final paper, but has come to truly shape my academic career.

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Left: Alfred Farland, "The Banjo Virtuoso", 1902



Right: Banjo, Mandolin, and Guitar Club, West Virginia University, 1896