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John Huber Revisited

LAURENCE LIBIN

JOHN HUBER, an obscure German-American piano maker active in southeastern Pennsylvania about 1800, left only three known instruments. A previous article by the author described two of these square pianos, made in the mid-1790s and destined for Pennsylvania German customers, Jacob Opp and Gottlieb Schober.¹ The third piano turned up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, just before that article went to press and was mentioned only briefly; it is discussed in more detail here. This instrument and some newly found documents enlarge our view of Huber's work and allow us to refine earlier suppositions.

The Tulsa piano remains in the family of its original owner, James Finney, said to have been a surveyor of British descent in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Family legend, related in an illustrated article on this piano in the *Tulsa Daily World* for 12 August 1934, says that Huber made Finney's piano in 1767, but its appearance and five-octave range clearly indicate a later date. Unlike Opp's and Schober's German-action pianos, encased in plain cherry, Finney's has an English action, significantly longer bass strings, and a mahogany-veneered and crossbanded case with inlaid striping and light paneled keyboard surrounds (fig. 1).

Throughout its existence this handsome, well-preserved piano has been accompanied by a manuscript music book to which successive generations of Finney's descendents contributed simple keyboard pieces. The manuscript's continuity and relationship to the same instrument over two centuries is highly unusual if not unique in American music history, and its content sheds light on the piano's function.

Because John Huber is a common Pennsylvania German name (also spelled *Huver* and *Hoover*), the question arose whether Finney's Anglo-American piano, on one hand, and Opp's and Schober's, on the other, might represent two builders of the same name. Indeed, an inscription on Schober's piano, purchased in 1796, locates Huber in Northampton, near present-day Allentown, but the label on Finney's piano reads *John Huber / Musical- Instrument-Maker / Harrisburg* (fig. 2). If one John Huber

1. Laurence Libin, "John Huber's Pianos in Context," this JOURNAL, 19 (1993): 5-37.

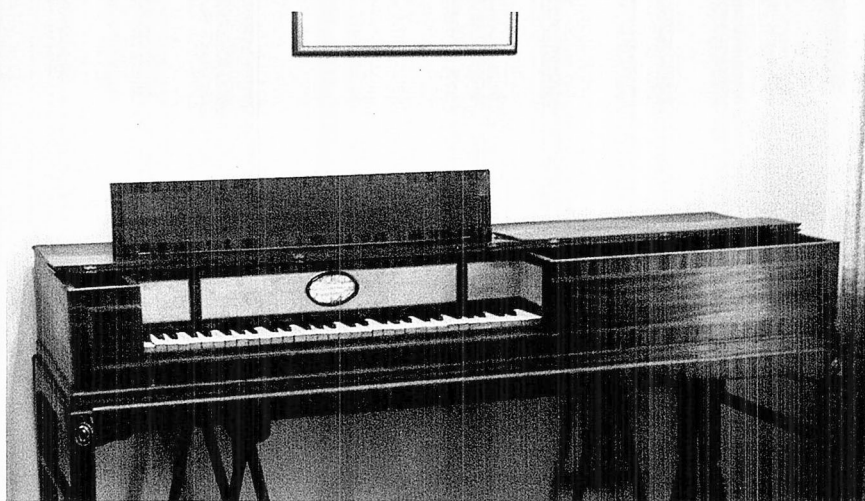


FIGURE 1. James Finney's piano, by John Huber of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, ca. 1805. This and succeeding photos courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. William Creider, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

built all three pianos, then sometime after 1796 he moved west from rural Northampton to Harrisburg, maybe seeking a larger, more affluent market.²

2. Newspaper advertisements furnish clues to the nature of this market. On 8 September 1800 one William Graydon, Esq., announced in the *Oracle of Dauphin & Harrisburg Advertiser*:

Hark! the *Music!* A sweet toned PIANO FORTE, to be sold on reasonable terms; the present owner intending to leave this state. Also a House to be rented . . . in a central part of the town, well calculated either for business or the accomodation of a private family, having five good Rooms, a good Kitchen, Oven, Cellar, &c. at the moderate price of 7 pounds. And on the Wednesday of the Court week . . . will be sold at public vendue . . . a number of articles of household furniture, such as Tables, Chairs, Looking Glasses, Beds, Bedsteads, Carpets, China, &c. . . N.B. Should the PIANO FORTE, not be sooner disposed of, it will be vendued on the same day with the above goods.

By giving his "sweet toned" piano pride of place in this substantial offering, its obviously well-to-do seller indicated the instrument's high status and desirability.

On 2 May 1807 the same newspaper printed the following appeal:

Charles Fortman, Master of Music, Begg leave to inform the gentlemen and ladies of Harrisburgh, and its vicinity, that he intends to give private instructions, on the Piano Forte, on the most moderate terms; he is confident that his experience in teaching, which he acquired thro' an uninterrupted practice during these 12 years past, in the city of Philadelphia, and in the country, will enable him to give ample satisfaction to his employers—any scholar of 8 years, and above that age, will be received; as to his abilities and conduct, the subscriber has honorable testimonies, from respectable characters, well known in this place. At the same time, he tunes and repairs instruments. The French and German languages, he understands, and teaches . . .



FIGURE 2. Nameboard detail and glazed nameplate of James Finney's piano.

From at least 1802 to 1809, Harrisburg's *Oracle of Dauphin & Harrisburg Advertiser* carried advertisements by John Huber. On 8 March 1802 he proclaimed: "Wanted Immediately. An Apprentice to the Musical Instrument making [craft]; a lad of good character shall have good treatment, and receive every necessary instruction to become a perfect workman in the art, by John Hoover." The same ad appeared later that year, but subscribed "John Huber."³ Huber's business seems to have flourished, because on 10 March 1804 he advertised: "Wanted Immediately, a journeyman cabinet-maker. One that will engage for 6 months, will be preferred. Good wages will be given. Apply to the subscriber in Harrisburgh. John Huber." It may be significant that he did not mention instrument making, but a notice in the same newspaper dated 25 April 1807 confirms his occupation:

John Huber, Musical Instrument Maker, in Locust street, next door to George Boyer's Tavern, Harrisburgh. Informs his friends and the public that he still continues to carry on the *Musical Instrument making business*, in

Fortman pitched his urbane appeal to the cultivated or culturally aspiring citizens who were most likely to own pianos.

3. The following announcement appeared on 18 June 1803: "Advertisement. Taken up by the subscriber, living in Derry township, Dauphin county, six STRAY SHEEP, on the 1st day of June instant; marked with red chalk, and ear marks. The owner or owners, by proving property and paying damages, may have them, by applying to JOHN HUBER." Because the 1800 census lists only one John Huber in Dauphin County, it appears that the piano maker owned this land east of Harrisburg (Derry Township is around Hershey); but the owner could have been a different John Huber, missed by the census.

all its various branches, such as Piano Forti, Harpsichords, and Spinets; all repairs of old instruments will be done by him, and music taught at reasonable prices. He flatters himself, that from his long experience in the above business, to give every one who wish[es] to favor him with their custom complete satisfaction. Instruments bespoke, shall be finished with speed—and scholars punctually attended to.

This reference to music teaching reveals a new aspect of Huber's career. Perhaps he competed with the local piano teacher and tuner Charles Fortman (see note 2). However, Huber's language could imply an earlier hiatus, perhaps due to the death of his wife; the *Easton American Eagle* for 12 January 1805 announced the death in Harrisburg of 28-year-old Mary Huber, whose husband, John, was from Northampton County. It remains uncertain that the piano maker was Mary's widower.

Music teaching figures again in an advertisement dated 9 January 1808:

John Huber, Musical Instrument Maker, Begs leave in this way to return sincere thanks to his customers and friends, for received favors, and informs them, that he has removed to the corner house opposite Mr. Boyer's tavern, in Harrisburgh, where he is ready to receive the commands of such as may wish to have made or repaired *Piano fortes*, *Spinnets*, *Harpsichords*, &c.—He has now on hand several of the above instruments in complete order, which he will dispose of on reasonable terms. He intends opening a school for teaching Music on the 3d Monday in the present month, at which time those inclined to be taught, shall be strictly attended to."

Huber continued making pianos for at least another year, because the same newspaper stated on 4 August 1809: "Wanted Immediately, a journeyman cabinet maker, capable of executing the outside work of Pianos, &c. Constant employ will be given by John Huber, Musical Instrument Maker."⁴

* * *

Idiosyncracies shared by Opp's, Schober's, and Finney's pianos confirm that the same man conceived all three. Features held in common

4. Huber might have been related to Michael Huver, who had advertised in the *Oracle of Dauphin & Harrisburg Advertiser* on 27 June 1807: "Wanted Immediately, An apprentice to the Cabinet and Carpenter business. A boy of about 14 or 15 years of age would be preferred. Inquire of Michael Huver." John and Michael may have been the so-named brothers born respectively in 1768 and 1778 to Michael Sr. and Anna Huber near Northampton. If Michael's older brother John is our man, his birthdate places him among the first generation of American-born piano builders.

include: (1) a fallboard lock positioned so that its bolt shoots sideways into the morticed right side of the keywell; (2) the treble end of the hitchpin plank terminating in a bracket shape that overlaps the soundboard; (3) the overhanging left edge of the soundboard secured by screws along a score line; (4) note names lettered on key levers as well as beside tuning pins; (5) the hitch pins and nut pins aligned on a grid of score lines; (6) the strings raised over a padded rail fronting the tuning-pin block; (7) the key levers slotted in from the front for guide pins; (8) closely similar, if not identical, ogee molding around the soundboard. Although any one or several of these characteristics might exist coincidentally in pianos by different builders, the presence of all eight in the three Huber instruments demonstrates their common origin.

Experience doubtless contributed to the conceptual refinement of Finney's piano compared to Opp's—for example, in its superior scaling and keyboard layout. But like Opp's and Schober's pianos, Finney's mixes skillful woodworking with some corner-cutting in materials and carelessness in assembly. For example, the back of the nameboard has a knot that would have disqualified that board had its front not been veneered. The solid mahogany lid, which has cracked along its grain, is less than half the thickness of the two earlier pianos' lids and lacks their distinctively pegged side rails and a prop-stick notch. The two brass hinges joining lid and spine have four screw holes in the spine leaf, but these received only three screws. Too-long screws in the lid leaf poke through the lid. If Huber provided a separate music desk, it left no trace.

As was increasingly common practice by 1800, Huber simply squared off the case top edges rather than molding them inside as in his earlier pianos. On the other hand, he lightly molded the front and side edges of the already thin lid to reduce further its apparent thickness. The fallboard is veneered and crossbanded on its inside, which is exposed when the fallboard stands to support a score while the main lid remains closed. Considering this detail, one is puzzled by the absence of a customary music rest fastened under the lid flap, as in Schober's piano. A storage compartment to the left of the keyboard has a removable lid with a lightly scratched compass figure underneath. This lid may once have been lifted by a brass knob, as in Huber's earlier pianos; only a screw hole remains. The fallboard lacks a brass knob found on the other pianos' fallboards, and its inlaid, diamond-shaped escutcheon has vanished.

The case (about 22.4 cm deep) is about 1 cm deeper than Schober's, and the case walls are a little thicker, the spine thickest of all at slightly more than 2 cm. A bottom molding about 3 cm tall embraces the sides and front (fig. 1). Light edging outlines the exposed corners of the case and legs. An inlaid band about 7.8 mm wide, of alternate light and dark stripes, separates the rectangular front panel from its crossbanding. The crossbanded nameboard displays a central panel of light wood flanked by two shorter panels that turn at right angles onto the cheeks. A raised, elliptical wood frame with broken glazing, centered laterally on the nameboard but placed slightly too high, encloses Huber's handwritten paper label (fig. 2).

The case appears to rest on a separate stand with cut-up front and side rails. However, the front and back rails are permanently affixed to the bottom, while the removable side rails act as stretchers between the front and back legs. Thinner stretchers connect these legs again lower down, and each side assembly is bolted from the side into nuts recessed in the front and back rails. Two ornamental brass bolt covers remain in place. The four square, tapered legs terminate in offset casters. A band of light inlay surrounds the legs near their feet except where this band is omitted behind the rear legs. To take weight off the legs, the piano's owners have sensibly elevated it on sawhorses.

The unveneered back of the spine reveals pegs and corner dovetails that correspond to those in Opp's and Schober's pianos. The case walls enclose a laminated sugarpine bottom about 7 cm thick at the keybed—more than twice as thick as the bottoms of Opp's and Schober's pianos—but only about 2.8 cm thick within the soundbox. An intermediate step in the bottom just behind the belly rail suggests a third, middle lamination. Pegs through the bottom secure the laminations and also anchor the belly rail, which is pierced by a rectangular mousehole, chamfered inside. Small screws secure the left side of the 3-mm-thick soundboard to a hollow shelf extending from the side of the belly rail over the highest keys.

Through the mousehole one can discern several flat, elongated cleats screwed to the J-shaped bridge through the soundboard, and a series of taller ribs placed more or less perpendicular to the bridge on either side of it, not passing beneath. The bridge is ebonized, pinned in a single row, and lacks the ornamental terminations found in Opp's and Schober's pianos (fig. 3). As was normal by this time, the bridge is undercut along the left side in the treble, giving it the appearance of leaning sharply outward; this undercutting places the bottom of the bridge

as far as possible from the left edge of the soundboard, maximizing the vibrating area between bridge and belly rail. The bridge placement affords generous bass string lengths and a rather narrow string band, less than 26 cm wide compared to about 28 cm in Schober's piano. At 55 cm from front to back (not counting molding), Finney's piano measures about 4 cm less than Schober's, which has the same FF-f³ range. Thanks in part to a narrow octave span, Finney's bass strings require a case only marginally wider than Schober's, about 161 cm compared to Schober's 160.5 cm for FF strings respectively 132.7 cm and 113.7 cm long.

Finney's piano has a straight tuning-pin block transecting the soundboard at a 73-degree angle. Unpierced, hand-forged tuning pins with slender tops (one torn) angle sharply into the block in two parallel double files along score lines, with pitch letters stamped alongside each pair of pins. Because the lowest octave is single-strung, those twelve notes have only single files of tuning pins, although pilot marks for a second file appear along the farthest right score line. The lowest twelve (single) strings are wrapped with unplated copper wire; the next twelve notes have paired brass strings, and the remaining bichords are steel.

Intersecting score lines on the hitchpin plank align steel nut and hitch pins, the tops of which were nipped off and left unfiled after being driven. (Huber earlier used neater flat-filed brass pins and more brass hardware generally.) Intermediate score lines locate the damper lifters, wooden rods ringed by leather disks that prevent the rods from dropping through their holes. Originally they rested on or just above the padded key tails, but someone unaccountably snapped off the bottom end of each rod, effectively immobilizing them. Depressing the keys now fails to raise the dampers, so for practical purposes the piano is unplayable.

The overhead damper arms, provided throughout the compass, are leather-hinged to a tilting panel in the spine. The arms are slotted for individual guide pins and returned by brass wire springs. A transverse wooden cover protects the damper heads. These are made of slips of red baize inserted in small concavities under slightly trapezoidal blocks glued beneath the ends of the arms. A steel hand lever, pivoted atop the left-side frame member, shifts a carved wedge under the damper assembly, raising all dampers at once. A flat, bent steel spring ensures the assembly's firm return. Huber omits other tonal devices, such as the knee-operated moderators present in Opp's and Schober's pianos.

The hammer rail in Finney's action is not attached by vertical side pieces to the key frame, as is usual, because the front-to-back connecting

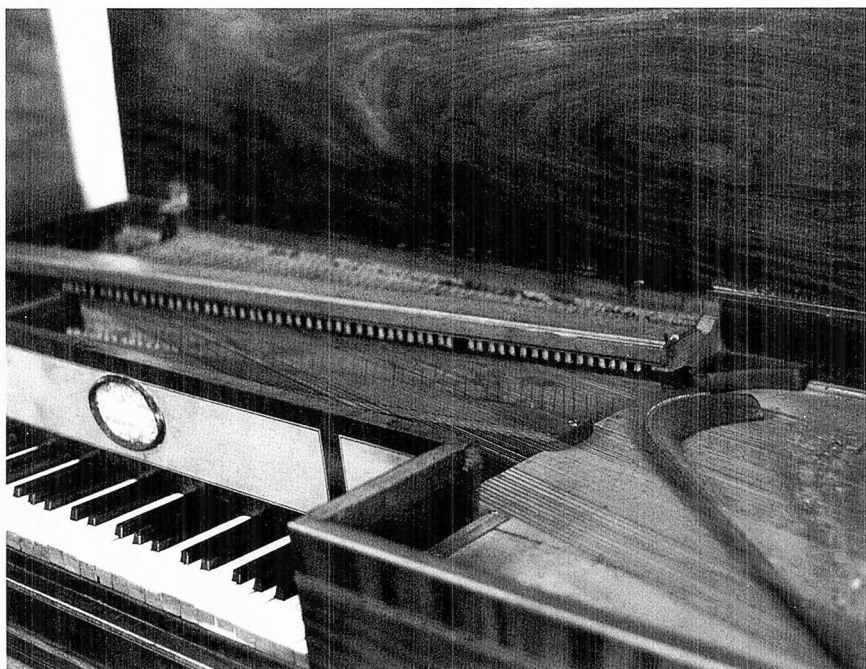


FIGURE 3. James Finney's piano. Partial interior view, showing the bridge, hitch-pin-plank bracket end, and hammer rail overlapping the soundboard.

rails of the key frame are inset as in Schober's piano, affording no purchase for vertical sides. Rather, the hammer rail and the separate guide-wire rail beneath it are both slotted into the left-side frame member and separately screwed to the soundboard shelf at the opposite end. The guide-wire rail is held up against the bottom of the shelf by a screw completely penetrating the shelf from the top. This inconvenient arrangement requires both rails to be removed and replaced simultaneously once the piano has been strung. Fortunately, the keyboard and key frame easily slide out together; nothing secures the frame to the keybed. The key slip is permanently affixed to a veneered rail, seemingly part of the case front but separate from it.

Finney's three-octave span of 47.6 cm is noticeably narrower than Opp's and Schober's, but the natural and accidental playing surfaces are longer. Ivory covers slightly overhang plain wood fronts on the natural keys, whose heads, like those on the earlier pianos, have double score

lines forward of the head-tail joint. Ebony slips cover the black-painted accidental blocks, which are about 1.1 cm tall and, unlike Opp's and Schober's accidentals, taper only slightly on the sides. As in the earlier pianos, the key levers taper toward the bottom for clearance, and the accidental keys hold their guide pins in slots cut into the front of the levers. The balance-pin mortices align along triple score lines as on Schober's keyboard. Small lead weights penetrate the tails of naturals 34 through 61 and accidental 59.

The levers bear stamped numbers, as well as octave numbers. Keys 1–19 lack an octave number; 20–31 are each additionally stamped *1*; 32–43 are stamped *2*; etc. Stamped pitch letters, with lower-case *s* indicating sharps (FF, FsFs, GG, GsGs, etc.) correspond to letters adjoining the tuning pins. Instead of indicating B flat by *B* and B natural by *H*, as he had done on his earlier, Germanic pianos, here Huber employs *As* and *B*, respectively. Further, he stamped string gauge numbers on the levers, thus: N^o OOO [key 3], OO [7], O [12], OOO [15], OO [19, stamped Bs in error for B], O [24], 1 [29], 2 [37], 3 [46], 4 [61]; these gauges are meant to be read from the top key down. The three lowest gauge marks appear to be redundant but possibly specify core wire diameters. It is interesting that Huber retains German gauge markings, perhaps indicating the source of his wire; a different numerical system gauged British wire.

Partly threaded steel rods screwed through the key levers impale thick leather disks that propel the hammer shanks. Brown leather tabs hinge the shanks to the underside of the hammer rail; lacking protection of a sandwiching strip, these hinges are prone to twist when the hammer rail is removed. Small blocks of cork form the hammer cores, which are topped by white leather pads and wrapped first with thin brown leather, then with two thicker white leather layers, the outermost being slightly thicker. The hammers are not graduated in size.

The hitherto unrecorded manuscript associated with Finney's piano measures about 21.5 cm tall by 28 cm wide and is bound in cardboard covered by marbelized paper. The handruled pages lack watermarks. About 1927 a family member, believed to be William Claude Creider (1881–1968), wrote inside the front cover:

This music book has always been with this little Huber piano—built 1767 March the first in the U.S. for James Finney, Harrisburg, PA. The instruction [sic] were first written by Sarah Elizabeth Finney 1779. There are four later Sarah Elizabeth's [sic] writings [sic] in this book. There have been

four pages taken from this book in recent years, they had the names and dates of the following writers—

No. I	Sarah Elizabeth	Finney	Harrisburgh, Pa.	1779
No. II	"	"	Stuart	"
No. III	"	"	Finney	"
No. IV	"	"	Hassinger	"
No. V	"	"	Creider	Scranton
No. VI	"	"	Creider	Broken Arrow, Okla.

England's tax on this piano was £100 or about \$500.

This information is of doubtful accuracy, but the year 1779 would suggest that the manuscript predates this piano and originated in conjunction with lessons on a previous instrument.

The missing initial pages must have explained the staff, clefs, and note names. The current first page begins by defining "a Pause or Stop" (illustrated by a fermata over a half-note) and goes on to explain other aspects of notation, time signatures, and note divisions. The next page defines note and rest values and explains dotted notes, and the next gives a table of conventional signs, marks, and letters including bar lines, repeat marks, fermata, da capo, articulation, and dynamic marks. Then follows a conventional table of graces. The fifth page teaches key signatures, quaintly explaining: "It is always to be considered and get acquainted, to know out of what a Key Note and [recte *an*] Air is to be played; by taken notice of the Last Note in the Bass, the last Note in the Bass is always the Key Note, and by learning the above Table you may find whether it is sharp or flat." All the above is written in a clear, mature hand, consistent with a late eighteenth-century date.

After a blank page the music begins on page 7, probably in the same hand as the foregoing. Subsequent blank pages may correspond to changes in handwriting and writer. The pieces are short, sometimes two per page, and of a simple, popular character; a few are texted. The Anglo-American repertoire spans a period from the Revolutionary era to after the Civil War.⁵ The last tune was pencilled evidently by five-

5. Retaining original forms, the pieces are titled, in order: Country Dance; Circuits; Free Mason's March; Coterie/Allemande; Pittsburgh Reel; Reel; The Man in the Moon; Cottillion; Our Pleasure; Paddy Wack; The Washer Woman; I'll have Pleasure when I ride Out; General Washington's March; The Rose Tree; Strephon & Phillis; Snatch fleeting Pleasure; The flowers of Edinburgh; (blank page); President's March; The White Cockaid; The New Constitution; Guardian Angels; Moulines Maria ("Moderato con Expressione" with *f* and *p* marks); The Cottager's Daughter; Owen; Hero Tekela (?); The Banks of the

year-old Sarah Elizabeth Creider, who died aged six on 15 January 1906. Her mother kept the piano until her own death in 1918. Thereafter, according to Mrs. William Emerson Creider (personal communication, 3 May 1993): “[H]er husband John Wesley Creider [1854–1941] lived at Scranton, PA, with a son S. Reed Creider. . . . In 1927 John Wesley Creider came with the Huber piano to Chandler, OK, where his son William Claude Creider was living. William Claude Creider and family moved to Broken Arrow, OK [where he was briefly a hotel proprietor], in 1933 later moving to Tulsa in 1936 where he resumed his occupation as a tailor and furrier. He lived in Tulsa with his family until his death in 1968.” William Claude’s only daughter was the last Sarah Elizabeth listed inside the cover, with the incomplete date suggesting she never made an entry. Her brother William Emerson Creider (born 1921) received the piano in 1975 when their mother, Julia Amelia, entered a nursing home. Happily, an interest in family history still motivates the numerous Creiders, who remain committed to preserving their musical heirlooms.

Dee; Black Bird; Roslin Castle &c.; The Three Captain’s; Lady Letitia Macdonell’s Minuett; Hornpipe; The lucky escape; Fisher’s Hornpipe; Sporting Moreen; The mer[r]y man home from the Grave; Britains Glory; Coolen (Coleen?); Col. Lenox’s March; Pennsylvania March; The Beggar Girl; The Chase; (blank); The quick March & Trio; Bonaparte’s March; I am too young to marry yet; Bonny Doon; The Invitation (“Words by Shakespeare, Music by Geo. Emrich”); The Tear (“sung by Mrs. Merry in the new play of the Counts of Burgundy”); Boyn Water; (blank); St. Patrick’s day in the morning; Soldiers Joy; Farewell to Lochaber; Prussian Rose; Bank of Flowers; Oh the moment was sad; (blank); German Waltz; First Love Redowa Duette by E. Mack; Marching Thro’ Georgia Grand March (title only; no music); (11 blank); Marching Thro Georgia (juvenile hand); (remainder blank). For many concordances, see James J. Fuld and Mary Wallace Davidson, *18th-Century American Secular Music Manuscripts: An Inventory*, MLA Index and Bibliography Series, no. 20 (Philadelphia: Music Library Association, 1980).