THE SURPRISING HISTORY OF A HYMN
"THE LITTLE BROWN CHURCH IN THE VALE"

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KYLE ROBERTS: Good afternoon. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I'm the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Welcome to today's virtual program, "The Surprising History of a Hymn: The Little Brown Church in the Vale" with Dr. Christopher Cantwell.

To begin, I want to acknowledge the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusett people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those of you joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and our digital archive, which has more than 120,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project. Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story.

Please do check out our website, congregationallibrary.org, to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

Now, for those of you who've been watching over the last couple of weeks, you know our spring virtual series has been on Congregationalists and the arts.

Now, it's not... for those of you joining us again in this program, you'll know that our library is well-known for its printed collections of theological and historical works, but that two of my favorite sections here at 14 Beacon are Class 22: Hymnals and Music, and Class 29: Poetry. There are literally thousands of books from the past several centuries full of music, poetry, hymns, and much more. So it is... So I'm pretty excited today to be able to bring you this talk, which is gonna do a deep dive into one of the Congregationalists' most beloved hymns.

Without further ado, let me please invite up our speaker. Christopher D. Cantwell is Assistant Professor of History at Loyola University Chicago. He is a scholar of religion and a former

museum professional who is interested in the ways Christianity, capitalism, and collective memory form and shape each other.

His much anticipated first book, *The Bible Class Teacher: Memory and the Making of the Modern*, charts the origins of America's white evangelical nostalgia, and will be out soon from NYU Press.

This project was preceded by an edited collection on the religious life of working-class Christians called *The Pew and the Picket Line*. Fantastic book. I encourage you to get a copy, as well as an article on the work of printers at religious publishing houses.

So when I knew, when I heard that Chris was working on this project, I couldn't wait to invite him to share with us some of the things that he's been uncovering. So I'm gonna turn myself off, and turn it over to you.

CHRISTOPHER CANTWELL: Great, Kyle. Thanks so much for that introduction as well as for the invitation to join you all.

As I mentioned, it's incredibly exciting for me to be here because, as you'll see in a little bit, I have kind of a deep fascination in the history of local churches. I think it's one of the overlooked corners of American religion. You know, the work of leading figures and broad movements is incredibly important. But I often think it's at, like, the neighborhood church level is where these things get worked out on the ground.

And so it's very exciting for me to be, you know, sharing this work at an organization that is engaged in preserving these stories and preserving these histories. So, thanks again, Kyle, for having me.

And as you hopefully know from the announcement for the event, our topic for today is the particular history of a hymn that was written by an identified Congregationalist and has a kind of interesting connection to a specific Congregational church in rural, northeast Iowa.

But I also think the story I want to tell you all this afternoon is so much more than that. It's a story about the sense of loss we all feel as we grow up and long for the days of our youth.

It's a story about how music helps us process those feelings. It's a tale about the construction, preservation, and absolute re-imagination of a specific church building. And it's also a story about how nostalgia would come to center one of the largest and most important religious communities of our day.

And so I want to share a little bit about my research through this sort of arc of a story. It's a story that has three acts built around the church, the hymn, and the and the relationship

between the two. And it's a story that starts with this guy, the many lives and afterlives of William S. Pitts.

Pitts was born in upstate New York in 1830, where he was, where he was trained to play music. And early in his life, he migrated to the Midwest, where he became a music teacher in Union, Wisconsin, just outside of Janesville, for those who know the area as well as near a town called Bradford, Iowa, in the northeast part of the state, about 100 miles from the Iowa-Wisconsin border.

In 1864, however, Pitts gave up teaching in order to pursue a career in medicine, which required him to uproot and move to Chicago, where he attended Rush Medical College, or what would become Rush Medical College, I should say. Tuition at the time was a whopping $25 to attend medical school in 1864. In order to cover the cost of this tuition, he took out the words to a song he had written several years earlier and sold it to a local music publisher to cover the cost of his school fees.

That song was called “The Little Brown Church in the Vale,” but is also sometimes called “The Church in the Wildwood.” Perhaps you're familiar with the song because this is actually usually the moment of the talk where I ask the audience who has heard of the song and have a conversation about, you know, what we associate with the song. But you know, since it's virtual, we can save that for the Q&A.

And I'll just say for now that for those of you who are not familiar with the song, it's really something of a unique contribution to the canon of American hymnody because in contrast to many gospel hymns, the song is not about God, or Jesus, or salvation. In fact, the Divine is not mentioned at all in the song’s four verses. Instead, the locus or the center of religious significance in the song are Pitts’ memories about the church he claimed to have attended as a child before moving to the city and the sense of longing that those memories create.

The city where he now lived was a place of conflict, confusion, and a looming tuition bill. And the old country church where he grew up was a place of peace and harmony. Now, this contrast is implicit because Pitts never calls out the modern world by name, but the song's driving refrain to “come, come, come to the church in the vale” creates a spatial and temporal distance, I think, between the city where he lived and the church where he came from.

And as the song's third verse reads, which I hope you can read in the in the sheet music up on the screen: “How sweet on a bright Sabbath morning to listen to the clear singing bell, its tones so sweetly are calling, o come to the church in the vale.” And this sort of appeal to the sense of loss one has when they grow up and leave home would lead the song to become something of an absolute sensation.

So according to the database, hymnody.org, which is maintained by Calvin University, “The Little Brown Church,” or “The Church in the Wildwood,” appears in more than a third of all

Protestant hymnals. And according to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, "The Little Brown Church" is, for them, one of the 30 greatest hymns in the history of Christianity, which is quite an accomplishment, I think. And according to their track list of the CD played here, it's number six, the sixth most important Christian hymn.

Now this importance of the hymn to local church life has meant that the song has made a number of surprising appearances in American popular culture. It's been recorded by artists as diverse as Johnny Cash, Ella Fitzgerald, Dolly Parton, and Charley Pride. And there's even an entire episode of "The Andy Griffith Show" based around the song where a city slicker who ends up lost in Mayberry is taught to appreciate the antiquarian rhythms of the town as Andy and Barney sing the song on their front porch one night.

And so as one journalist wrote, who I found in sort of doing research on the history of the song, one journalist sort of conveyed about it that if you were white, and Protestant, and raised in the 20th century, you grew up singing the song. And this is a contention I can actually confirm, because my introduction to "The Little Brown Church" came when I was just a baby. The first time I learned of this song was because my father, who's pictured here holding me, would sing it to me as a lullaby every night. And the song became kind of an earworm I couldn't shake until I began to do research on religion and memory more broadly.

And I bring up my father in part because I think the reason he sang it, like his life sort of tracks the meaning of the song that I think it has for a lot of different people. Because his father, my grandfather, grew up as a farmer in northeast Arkansas and as a child, or once he got married, he moved to outside Chicagoland where he worked in a tool and dye factory in order to sort of make a better life for my dad and his sisters. And when they would sing "The Little Brown Church" as I was growing up, it was I would hear them sort of, you know, longing for the places they had left behind in order to sort of make the living that they now enjoyed. And the song helped them sort of, you know, process those feelings and reflect upon them.

Now, because of this popularity of the song, the rural Iowa church that is said to have been inspired by the song has become something of an international tourist destination. Today, a dedicated group of about 30 members make up a permanent congregation, which is affiliated with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

But on any given Sunday, I've attended services there myself, on any given Sunday, more than double that number is attending services. And over half the congregation is usually coming from abroad to try to get a glimpse of this church that inspired a song that their parents may have sung to them.

There is a gift shop in the back. I should say a gift bookshelf is what it's more like. And up there on the right is the piggy bank I purchased when I went and visited, so you can store money in the Little Brown Church. And they ask for those donations to be sent back to them.

But in particular, the site has become something of a popular wedding destination for folks who desire kind of a rustic backdrop to their matrimonial photos. According to the church, more than 74,000 weddings have taken place since the church's founding, including that of Iowa Senator, Chuck Grassley, who was married there.

And on some days, the minister told me, the current minister told me, that on some Saturdays during the summer, he will see or do as many as 7 to 10 wedding services as people just stack their ceremonies, one on top of the other from like, you know, 9 am until 6 pm, that people will just file through and get married so they can sort of be at this particular place.

You know, in fact, there's really, when I went to visit the church, there's hardly... the town that was once there is no longer there. And the only thing that really remains is, next door to the church is a hotel and banquet hall, which I'm sure, I'm sure does a brisk business in the summer as they host the receptions for all of these ceremonies.

And so the church and the song have become something of icons of Protestant Americana. It's a symbol of the small town values that supposedly made America what it eventually became. And it's sort of resonant with lots of people, including in my own family.

But there's just one problem, however. Very little of this story is actually true.

Neither Union, Wisconsin nor Bradford, Iowa had churches when Pitts lived nor taught there. They were simply too small to afford a church. The building that now claims to be the Little Brown Church was built more than ten years after Pitts wrote the song.

And what is more, what I think is actually even more important is that if you look at the song's original lyrics, because the most common versions today often contain an altered verse. The song "The Little Brown Church," is actually not about a church at all. Rather, it's about the more sort of macabre dimensions of Victorian sentimentality.

The story Pitts would later tell is that the song's origins came to him in the summer of 1857 when he was visiting the town of Bradford, looking for a place to move his young family. This is right before he decided to move into medicine. And while he was walking through the town, he came, he came upon a glen that struck him as particularly beautiful and a place that could have a church. But there was no church at that moment in which he actually visited there.

And so he took out his notebook and wrote down some words of a song about a church that could be in that spot. But in Pitts' rendering, the church's significance is not because of what it says about the religious virtues of America's heartland. Rather, the church is important, in Pitts' original song the church is important because next to it is a cemetery that contains the remains of a long-lost love.

As Pitt's original third verse reads: “There close by the church in the valley, lies one that I love so well. She sleeps sweetly beneath the willow, near the little brown church in the vale.”

These more romantic qualities to the song would come to define the church's early history, excuse me, the song's early history after its publication. Because throughout much of the 19th century, as I looked for sheet music and advertisements for the song, the only place I could find it listed was not as a religious song, but in college songbooks or alongside popular sheet music for parlor games and parties.

And in fact, my favorite version of the song comes from the Yale Glee Club, who really leaned in to the more romantic versions of the song and, like all young men did, made it, I think, in sort of 19th century standards, somewhat sort of a little more risque and amorous. Because Yale would go on, the Yale Glee Club that is, would go on to write an additional fifth verse that read: “Come to the church in the wildwood, for there’s where my love used to be; She could dance, she could sing, she could turn a handspring, She could climb up a sycamore tree.” So a song of faith, family, and America, this is not.

In fact, the popularity of “The Little Brown Church” as something of a popular love song was such that after its publication, Pitts would actually go on to have a, something of a, of a successful minor career as a songwriter in the 19th century, where he spun out a number of similar tunes about, sort of, you know, the longing for a lost lover.

So his other big hit after “The Little Brown Church” was a song called “‘Ally Ray,” which is about a young man pining for another girlfriend who died tragically too young. There's a lot of, a lot of dead women in Pitts’ songs.

But my favorite of his other hits was, he actually wrote a prequel to “The Little Brown Church” that told the story of the woman that was supposedly laid in the grave. And her name, unsurprisingly, to match with the song, was called “Nellie Wildwood.” And that would sort of tell you the back story of this young woman that the church... “The Little Brown Church in the Vale” sings to.

The history of “The Little Brown Church,” as we perhaps more know it today, would come almost 50 years after Pitts’ original publication of the song, which takes us to the second act of our story, which is how a church became a song.

The history of Little Wildwood Church as we all may know it begins almost 50 years later in 1905. And the details here are still incredibly sketchy as a lot of sort of myth and memory of American life are.

But as far as I can piece together, sometime around 1900, a music teacher from the city of Minneapolis came down to Des Moines, Iowa, to attend a National Association of Music Teachers conference there. Now, this music teacher had grown up singing “The Little Brown

Church" when he was a young man. And when he learned that the church that supposedly inspired the song, or that the songwriter supposedly lived not too far from Des Moines, Iowa, this music teacher made a side trip on his way home to swing by Bradford to see this famed church of a song that he loved.

And what he found was actually pretty disheartening. Because Bradford, like many rural communities in the late 19th century, had come to decline... had saw its population decline in the decades after the American Civil War. The arrival of the Illinois Central Railroad in nearby Nashua, Iowa, which is, would eventually absorb Bradford, stole a great deal of business from the people in the town, leaving the town largely abandoned when this music teacher came there.

But lo and behold, the music teacher found a church. And the church the music teacher found was not the Little Brown Church in the Vale, but it was actually called the First Congregational Church of Bradford. It had been founded in 1955 alongside the town. But for much of the congregation's history, it had met either in the home of members or in the general store. It wasn't until 1864, the same year Pitts published his song, that the congregation had enough members and enough money to complete building a sanctuary.

These facts, however, did not stop the music teacher. And despite the fact that the church did not have a cemetery, and I think at the time the church was actually painted white, the music teacher was certain this was his little brown church. And he was just incensed at the neglect that the church had received during this time. And of course, there was no one there to correct this guy because the church had disbanded alongside the town several years earlier.

Upon returning home, this music teacher fired off an article to his local paper, which I have sort of printed up here, which soon became syndicated in a lot of other newspapers across the country in what... kind of a viral sensation about people clamoring to sort of defend, and protect, and preserve, or save this Little Brown Church.

In response, a number of Iowa leaders came together and after 1900 and organized a Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church that solicited donations from across the country in order to "restore" the church to its "original" brown color and reopen it as a functioning congregation.

By 1914, the Society had raised enough money not only to completely renovate the building, but also to pay a minister to begin holding services there. Because again, and this is worth underscoring, there was no one going to church here at this particular moment. They had to sort of, you know, outsource a salary or fundraise a salary because there was no congregation to speak of at this moment.

And in a telling shift, as the Society sort of solicited donations across the country, they did not describe their work as the effort of protecting or preserving a church that inspired a quirky

love song. Instead, the Society came to describe the Little Brown Church as a memorial to the religious values of those white Protestant pioneers who had supposedly settled the great Midwest.

According to the Society, and these are some quotes from their promotional material, the town had built the church so that they may, "might worship God and teach their children in the importance of Christian living and service." Preserving the church was vital, they argued, because, "it remains as a monument to the enterprise and devotion of those pioneer Christians in America."

Now, driving this shift, I think, was a tectonic population shift that occurred in the decades after the song's original publication. Because at the time Pitts published his tune, fully 80% of the United States lived in what the census identified as a rural community. That's a town of less than 2,000 members. But by the time the Little Brown Church had been rediscovered, nearly half of the country lived in an urban area. I mean, this very much followed Pitts' own story as he left Bradford in order to obtain an education in a much larger city.

Now, for those of you who remember your American history classes, you'll know that immigration from Europe drove much of this transformation as it did in every city. So I teach here in Chicago, and it is a point of pride for most Chicagoans to repeat this fact, that in the 1900 census, 80% of the city of Chicago was either European immigrants or the child of a European immigrant. And cities in this area became sort of a center of sort of polyglot, diverse, multicultural, European immigrant life.

But the story of American urban spaces is also one of an equally as consequential influx of white, native-born Protestants like Pitts, who also moved to the city. At the same time, Chicago's population boomed, for example, more than half of all townships in Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, and Iowa saw their populations decline. And according to one 1910 survey, fully one in five city residents in 1910 had spent at least a portion of their life on an American farm.

Now, these rural migrants, I think, experienced the rise of urban America in a particular way. Having been raised in largely homogeneous communities like Bradford that paid at least a kind of deferential attitude to their local churches, these migrants understood their physical relocation to be something of a cultural displacement as well. Their way of being was now just one of many ways of living in the city. And oftentimes it was a minority way of actually living and acting out in the world at that time... or in urban spaces. Finding a way to bolster the cultural authority of white Protestants became a central preoccupation of American culture at this moment.

And I think the Little Brown Church was intimately a part of this trend. Because in 1911, for instance, the Men and Religion Forward Movement selected the Little Brown Church as its anthem. The Movement, for those of you who don't know, was a year-long ecumenical revival

held by evangelicals that sought to increase the participation of men in urban churches. It did this primarily through a series of revivals that were held in every major metropolitan area between 1911 and 1912.

But as a number of historians found, these revival meetings would then often spin out a number of, sort of, political campaigns that focused on trying to, sort of, re-inscribe Protestant power on urban governments. They worked at outlawing the saloon in local communities, enforcing Sunday closing laws, debating Socialist Party and labor organizing members. And in one particular instance in Philadelphia, the movement was successful in getting Bible studies on every factory floor in the city of Philadelphia as a way of trying to convert these working-class immigrants to Protestant Christianity.

And as the anthem for this movement, as an anthem for this effort, they chose "The Little Brown Church" because it spoke to their attempt to try to recall or revive the rural values of their past. As the movement's main organizer argued in his sort of efforts, “the message of the Men and the Religion Forward Movement is in that hymn. In addition to reminding men where they began their Christian experience away back in boyhood, the tune also challenged men to make the religious fervor and ideals of their early manhood a reality in America once again.” So this movement was attempting to, in many ways make America great again.

Of course, the Little Brown Church's resurrection is an icon of white Protestant Americanism did present the Society overseeing this preservation efforts with a couple of problems. Which brings us to the final act of our story about rewriting history.

First was what to do about the discrepancy between the song’s publication and the church's actual construction, excuse me, how to get Pitts and the song to work in tandem.

There's actually a wonderful scene I found in the early meetings of the Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church, where an original member of the First Congregational Church of Bradford showed up to the meeting and kind of raised his hand and said, guys, we're not saving the Little Brown Church. We're saving the First Congregational Church of Bradford. So the Society attempted to fix this error by commissioning a committee to go out and find Pitts in order to bring the story of the song to his church.

In 1915, a poor librarian traveled all the way to Brooklyn, New York, where she had found Pitts living in retirement with his son. After completing his medical degree, Pitts had actually returned to Iowa, where he practiced medicine in a town called Fredericksburg for several years and even served as mayor of the town for a while, until eventually retiring and moved to Brooklyn, where this librarian from the Iowa State's Historical Society was sent by the Little Brown Church to go and try and find him.

And in 1915, this librarian sat down with Pitts to interview him and asked, how did the song come to be? And how is its relation to the church sort of worked out? And I have up on the screen a clip of his answer to this librarian, which sounds very much like an artist who is upset that people are only asking him to play one song over, and over, and over again.

"Now, do you ask how I come to write the song 'The Little Brown Church?' How I came to write the songs, 'Little Fred,' 'The Isles Beyond the River,' 'The Old Musician and His Harp,' 'Ally Ray,' 'Nellie Wildwood,' 'Angels Took Her Home,' 'Lilly Bell,' 'Our Brave Boys in Blue,' 'Sabbath Bells,' . . . and others. They are the legitimate children born of poesy and song."

So he's upset that after all of this work he's done, only one song that he no longer has any control over has become his greatest hit. And he's become kind of sick of people returning to him over, and over, and over again, asking how it connected.

And so what the Society ended up doing in order to sort of bridge this gap, since Pitts wouldn't provide them with the information, is they concocted a story that while Pitts was practicing medicine in Fredericksburg, he also made a trip to Bradford to teach a music class at the local school in Bradford. And upon arriving in the town, Pitts was of course shocked to find a church built in the exact location where he had imagined a church existing several years earlier. And upon seeing the church, he agreed to sing the song at the church's dedication, thereby marrying "The Little Brown Church" with the building that now bore the song's name.

The story is certainly plausible because Fredericksburg was only a day's ride from Bradford. And Pitts did continue to teach music throughout his medical career, sort of going to private academies and performing or offering songs.

But the tale is also highly improbable because the school where Pitts supposed to [teach] was only founded the same year he sold the song. So why he would be in the town teaching at a school that hadn't opened yet is kind of beyond me.

But even more revealing is in the same trip that this librarian from Iowa took to Brooklyn to try and find Pitts, she also found the minister who was at the church at the time of its constructing... construction, excuse me, a young man by the name of Jay K... well, he's old at that point... a man by the name of Jay K Nutting.

And she asked him, can you tell me about this dedication ceremony, the church's consecration, when Pitts supposedly sang his song? And his answer to me is sort of one of the funniest moments in the story. Because as he sort of told the tale, that the day this is... and this is a quote from him at the bottom, "the day proved extremely unfavorable." Of all of those invited, he invited, only one of the ministers he had invited was able to attend. And that was Reverend Dr. D. N. Bordwell, then a pastor at Charles City, about 12 miles up the Cedar River.

“He preached the sermon to a small audience, and I think he also offered a Dedicatory Prayer. But I've been able to find no record of this dedication, probably because the church considered it a failure, of which the less the said, the better.”

So it's hard for me to grasp that something so consequential and important would have taken event... taken place at that moment that people sort of willfully tried to forget.

The other problem, of course, dealt with what to do with the song's lyrics. What do you do with this, this hypothetical lover in a nonexistent cemetery if your church is now becoming the center of sort of Protestant American values? Well, this actually proved to be the easiest thing to fix in the song, I have found.

Because what ended up happening is that revivalists, evangelists, gospel musicians simply began spinning out new versions of the song. In total, I've been able to find more than a dozen different renditions of “The Little Brown Church,” all of them written and published after 1900, which is again when the song began to appear in hymnals.

It wasn't until after 1900 that the song would start showing up in religious books. And the goal of many of these new versions was an attempt to transform this love song into an anthem that celebrated America's rural, white, Protestant heritage. Often, composers would simply strike the woman from the song and replace her with something else to bring the song in line with its new meaning.

As one 1914 rendition read: “Oh the Little Brown Church in the Wildwood, with the clustering vines at the door. Oh the songs that were dear to our childhood, let us sing them together once more.”

But several of these songs also had more sort of punchier and aggressive verses that spoke to the song’s commitment or relation to the attempt by many Protestants to exert their cultural authority over a changing American landscape. One 1911 version of the song reimagines the Little Brown Church as a fortress from which the Christian soldiers would march forth and reclaim America.

“Brothers, now, from the Savior let us rally.” This is the verse. “Let us serve him with who never will fail. Against the foes of the truth, let us sally from the Little Brown Church in the vale.”

In fact, the association of the Little Brown Church with the preservation of white Protestant culture became so strong that in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan actually wrote their own rendition of the song that reimagined the Little Brown Church as a flaming cross around which people would pray.

As their third verse read: “there's a cross that is burning in the wildwood. Its beauty reflects to the skies. At its base, you will find thousands kneeling, praying that its meaning never dies.”

By far the most popular rendition of the song, however, and perhaps the one that you all are most familiar with yourself, would come from evangelical composer E. O. Excell. Excell, like so many others at this time period, was born and raised on an Ohio farm until he became trained in music and served as a musician alongside several revivalists and evangelists throughout the late 19th century. And... until in 1900, where he became a professor of music at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. And in 1910, as he published his own set of hymnals, he jumped on "The Little Brown Church" bandwagon and wrote his own version of the song.

And of all the renditions of "The Little Brown Church," Excell's is by far the most nostalgic, which is why I think it's the most popular. In his version, the church becomes not just a place of personal loss, but an icon of perpetual longing. Where Pitts mourned the hypothetical passing of a hypothetical woman, Excell grieves for a lost religious world that the Little Brown Church supposedly once anchored.

As Excell's third verse reads, which again would replace the verse in which the woman is mentioned in Pitts' tune, "o come to the church in the wildwood, to the trees where the wildflowers bloom. Where the parting hymn shall be chanted, and we will weep by the side of the tomb."

So there's a sense of loss, a sense of, a sense of longing. And there is a death. But in place of a person, I think, what Excell is mourning, is a loss of a world that sort of became sort of a, mowed over in the rise of, sort of, an industrial urban America. And it's after Excell's version, of course, that the song would really begin to take off.

So here are a couple of graphs that sort of show you how the song's popularity really lines up with this history. On the top is a Google Ngram that shows the phrases "the Little Brown Church," as well as "the church in the wildwood" in Google's corpus of digitized records. And you can see there's an initial flurry in 1860 after the song is published, but then it kind of declines in popularity until 1900 when the song is rediscovered and reimagined as this anthem for Protestant America.

And then in the bottom is the graph from hymnary.org that shows when the song began appearing in Protestant hymnals. And again, you can see it's not until 1900, in 1910, really, when Excell writes his version of the song that it becomes widely adopted in Protestant hymnals.

So the question, I think, becomes as we, as we come to a close here, is what does all this mean? What does, what does this story actually tell us? And I think it speaks to a couple of different things.

First, as many of you perhaps follow contemporary politics know, the political history of American evangelicalism is going through something of a moment.

The revelation that 81% of evangelicals have supported Trump throughout his runs for office have led to sort of a deluge of scholarship as folks try to figure out how a voting block that once considered itself the standard bearers of American values are supporting, or supporting a twice divorced casino operator who struggles to pronounce books of the Bible.

And in part of this, and in this sort of interpretation, one of the most popular theories about why this has happened comes from Robert Jones, who heads up the Public Religion Research Institute, who argued as early as the South Carolina primary in 2016 that Trump was having success with evangelicals because he was transforming "value voters" into what he called "nostalgia voters" who longed for an imagined America where Christianity reigns supreme. And in this rendering, the most important part of that phrase, "Make America Great Again" was the word "again," because it imagined this past that Trump promised to make true.

But as the history of "The Little Brown Church" reveals, I think, Trump was actually tapping into something that had long been a part of American evangelical, American evangelical culture and simply bringing it to the forefront: this sort of longing for an America before, sort of, white, Protestant Christianity was displaced by a diverse, multicultural society.

But on another more profound level, I think, "The Little Brown Church" also highlights the fraught relationship between religion, race, and the stories we choose to tell about ourselves. Because I don't want to conclude this talk today by suggesting that everyone who sings "The Little Brown Church" is a red hat wearing, Christian nationalist. That not the story of my father and his interest of the song. That's not the story of many people's sort of draw to the song.

But I do think the song's tortured relationship with the particular building does caution us to be more thoughtful about the stories we choose to tell that illustrate and animate our religious identities.

Because at a particular moment in time at the turn of the 20th century, a number of Protestants we today identify as evangelicals, reached back into the remarkable diversity that is the history of American Christianity, and selected a church in northwest Iowa, excuse me, northeast Iowa to be the standard bearer, the exemplar of their faith.

Not only does this move implicitly denigrate those whose histories began in the deep South, the Southwest, or abroad, it also completely erases those Native communities who also lived and worshiped on that land before the Little Brown Church's pioneer Christians displaced them. For some singers of the song, this is exactly the point.

But for those of us who wish to tell a more diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive history of American religion, we would do well to sing of other churches as well. Which is again why I value the work of the CLA so much, because it's doing... because unlike novelists and fiction writers, the stories we historians tell are only as good as the source material we have to tell

them with. And I wish the CLA the best in continuing to gather these stories so future historians can draw upon them as well.

So with that, I will take your questions. And thanks so much for, again, for having me.

KYLE: Well, I always appreciate a shout out for the CLA at the end of a talk. And one of the things, Chris, that really struck me is the way in which the archive helps and also hinders.

So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, how you would do this, how do you do this research, right? How do you take something that is a, for many, a kind of maybe oral or sonic memory and find all of these twists and turns in its history?

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah, that's a great question.

I mean, in many ways this was a project that was only made possible by the digitization of primary sources and the availability of printed material as machine readable text.

Because, you know, I... you know, I initially discovered early on in my research on Chicago in the book you referenced earlier, that Pitts had passed through Chicago because he was a part of this broader movement of sort of rural Protestants to the city for a variety of reasons. But initially I just kind of stopped because I didn't think there was anything I could do with that other than knowing that he lived there.

But then my ability to sort of, you know, search a digitized corpus to see where the song was actually being advertised, where it was being sung, really made the, kind of, the piecing together of this really disparate story possible.

The archive I'm forever indebted to is the Library of Congress' Chronicling America project, which seeks to digitize small town newspapers, since they often don't have the wherewithal or the money to do some project like that.

And it's in that digitized collection that I found the kind of, the music teacher story where he finds the church and he's like, oh my gosh, this is terrible, nobody's taking care of it. And then he told two friends, and then they told two friends, and then it began showing up in all of these different newspapers across the country.

And so it's really only through sources the church did not save itself that you're able to kind of piece this story together.

KYLE: Well, I'm going to... So while you were talking, I quickly snapped this photo.

So, had you come here to do your research, we would have pulled out two folders: Bradford, [Iowa]: the First Congregational Church, Nashua, [Iowa]: The Little Brown Church. And you

would have found a bevy of printed materials on this. You might have been a little confused about which church is which, but in fact, the same materials are in both folders... You know, different iterations of the same materials are in both folders. And I'm finding that fascinating.

Of course, there's... you teach in a public history program, so I'm sure you would have advice to our archivists about, you know, how to kind of label a history like this. But I also wonder, you know, what is this, what is it about print, you know, for Protestants? Why do we actually have so many folders of this?

I mean, there can be questions about why the church doesn't save things themselves. And I will say that we actually have two more archival collections here. We have the microfilm for all of the church records from the Little Brown Church that was filmed in 1985 and given to us because it was felt that the national library should have that story. And also we have a minister's papers who was the minister in the Little Brown Church from 1925 to 1927. So you have his records.

But, you know, sort of curious, I mean, you know a lot about kind of the dynamics of Protestantism. You know, why has print been this kind of persistent piece in the story?

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah, yeah, that's a great question.

And I guess my reaction to it is actually to kind of, to push back against the framing a little bit because I think the reason that print resonates with this story is because it's tied to a material object, right?

Because I think we sometimes think that Protestants, they don't have icons, they don't have saints, they don't have statues, but they still have material items that they ascribe religious meaning and value to. And I think the Little Brown Church sort of fits that role. Is that in lieu of amulets, and rosaries, and saints, and statues, the church sort of, you know, fills that kind of space.

And I think it's even sort of reinforced if you go there, because if you visit the Little Brown Church, you'll find that it's actually, there's actually several Little Brown Churches that are at the Little Brown Church because there are all these scale models of the building. There are two outside. There's one in the restroom. There's one on the altar. And then, of course, you can buy and take home with you all of these miniature Little Brown Churches.

And I think for all of the important that print is, is this sort of like the... print is the production of an authoritative story about that space, right? And about those items as a way of sort of validating them as religiously meaningful and valuable.

KYLE: Love that. And I love that you've turned that from print, which is gonna have that central role, to material religion more broadly... an area that I know you've done a ton of work in.

So some great questions here coming in. And folks, we've got plenty of time for Q&A.

Anna Taylor Sweringen asked, so when did churches start to adopt it for their hymnals? Is there a, when does that kind of hymnal embrace kind of take off?

CHRISTOPHER: Right. Yeah.

And I think that really comes down to E. O. Excell and his imprint on the history of American hymnody, because he was a real innovator in the publishing of religious hymnals.

Because in the past, how hymnals were usually published is either you had an incredibly popular evangelist like a Dwight Moody or a Billy Sunday, who would hire a music director, who would publish a hymnal for them. That's one way a hymnal would get produced. The other way was that like the Methodist Church or the Congregational Church would commission a hymnal for those denominations.

And what Excell did out of his experience with evangelists is basically to go rogue and just publish hymnals that any church can use. So he just drew upon the most popular songs that he thought would appeal to Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians of all types. And so they often were kind of devoid of doctrinal liturgies and more filled with these popular songs like "The Little Brown Church," which is why, you know, Excell remains the most widely, you know, most successful music publisher in American history at that moment.

KYLE: Right. Great. So following another question about Excell. This comes from Max Grant, who's on our Board of Directors and a great supporter of the library.

He wonders if Excell's version evokes weeping by the side of the tomb to connect with the story of Easter and specifically the women going to the empty tomb. Is there a crucifixion/resurrection theme and how that might... and if there is, does that connect with nostalgia at all?

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right.

It's because the tomb is, the tomb is referenced, but then it's not filled by Excell's lyrics at all. And in fact, like Excell's lyrics would take Pitts' version exactly and just replace the third verse, which references the woman in the cemetery. And then fill it with that, what that verse I read, I read for you all.

And it is. And I think like he intentionally leaves it vague so we can, we can put in the tomb, whatever is meaningful, whatever we're mourning for at that moment is what then occupies that space. Because, you know, he doesn't, he doesn't tell us what's in it at all.

You know, I tend to think that what the tomb is I do think it's evocative of Easter. But I also think he's kind of presenting the Little Brown Church as a tomb, right? And the congregation that used to be in there is no longer in there, in the kind of, his rendering. It's sort of a, you know, a church without life in it anymore. And that's why it's so profoundly sad to Excell and why he encourages the singers to imagine how they can make it real again.

KYLE: There's a great comment here from Mark Rideout that kind of follows on that.

I've a copy of a songbook, *Best Loved Hymns*, used after just about every church supper at the Congregational church in North Redding, Massachusetts. It was compiled by Florence Martin. "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," in this booklet has only two verses focusing on the church and Sabbath morning.

And what I love here is that you're getting us to really dive in and see which verses are in there.

We sang our faith vibrantly.

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah.

KYLE: So I know because you've shared this with me, that you've actually been to a service at the Little Brown Church. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how that song is used today as you kind of understand it in that church specifically.

And I don't know if you, if you went to lots of other services to find if it has a spot in the liturgical calendar, or...

CHRISTOPHER: [LAUGHTER] Little Brown Church Day. No. Yeah.

You know, as part of this research, I felt, kind of, you know, an ethical commitment to make them aware that I'm writing the history of the song. And its kind of a tortured relationship to the building.

And the current pastor of the church, Drew McHolm, who's a really generous and wonderful human being, I mean, he knows the actual relationship to the song. You know, the building wasn't there when Pitts wrote the tune. But he also knows that the, you know, a congregation has value. And he is, he knows that it can provide a real ministry to people in a lot of different ways.

The thing that stood out to me the most when I visited there is the kind of fine line that Pastor Drew has to walk between, you know, ministering to 30 people who live in Nashua, Iowa, 365 days a year, and then ministering to the thousands of other people who kind of pass through at any given moment. And so you can, you know, he's got kind of two jobs at once.

But the thing that struck me is that the end of every service, he'll stand up and say, okay, now it's time to sing the "company song," as he calls it. Because he knows that, you know, the affiliation between the song and the church is largely what gives them the income to keep that small congregation functioning. And so he really sort of leans into it.

And so, I sang the company song while I was there. It's the... it's basically the Doxology for the service at the end of every gathering.

KYLE: Another... so many great questions today. Thank you all so much in the audience.

So Bryan Morey, a fantastic Loyala public history graduate who I got to work with, and… asked, could the connection between this specific song and nostalgia relate more broadly to the continuing use of traditional hymns in many churches today instead of adopting contemporary worship music?

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right.

And I think you can tell. I mean, this is actually what my research is about, is the way the sense of longing, you know, really manifests itself in really every religious community, in every religious tradition, with the rise of industrial capitalism that's often centered in major urban spaces.

You know, and I think what the, kind of the subtext of my interest in the Little Brown Church is that, you know, we often think religious communities are held together by sacred history, right? The stories of the origins of the earth, of Jesus Christ's sort of life, ministry, and resurrection. But I also think religious communities are held together by stories of the more recent past as well. And I think that's what the Little Brown Church, you know, shows us.

And you can find similar working out of these kind of, appealing to history as a way of building identity is a part of that as well. Yeah. I mean, you know, there's a whole other story one could tell about, you know, "Give Me that Old Time Religion," which was another popular tune published at this exact same time, time period, which was a re-appropriation of the Negro spiritual for white audiences because it spoke to their desire to return to simpler times at that moment.

Yeah, I mean, if you pay attention, you can find this stuff everywhere at the turn of the 20th century.

KYLE: So another great question here, and this maybe, maybe offers another side, asks about another side, another form of reception.

Do you think the popularity of the song coincided with the growing political popularism animosity from rural areas towards industrialization and robber barons in the East? I feel like you've talked a lot about urban realities, but what do you do? Is there a rural response that they see something in this too?

CHRISTOPHER: That's a great question because it really is urban congregations that are singing this country tune. That's a fantastic question.

You know, and I think the way in which, sort of, urban middle-class congregations appropriating this history are showing up in the, kind of the way in which the folks who continue to live in Nashua and Bradford find themselves frustrated by the resurrection of the story, right?

Again, like my favorite story from this research was when the original church member shows up to the preservation meeting and he's like, hey guys, this is my church. And they're kind of like, no, it's not, it's our church now, right? Like, it's... we are, we are taking this history for ourselves.

And so I would love to find how that would work the other way. Because my guess is for folks who grew up in rural spaces and recognize that it's not idyllic, you know, they're gonna sing a very different kind of song.

And that's a great research project that, you know, maybe that's the next project. I don't know.

KYLE: I'm gettting flashes... of nostalgia steeple jacking, too, which is absolutely fantastic. And you know, in-baked in our Congregational polity to, you know, have that ability for pieces of property to change ownership and to change meaning.

So I think, you know, one thing that's probably gonna be fascinating for a lot of people is this kind of wedding industry. And I wonder if that's the fourth act? You know, Charles Packer, one of our Board of Directors and a great scholar himself, says, I'm friends with the previous minister, Reverend Mann, and he's indicated the number of weddings has been diminishing. That said, weddings consumed his weekends most seasons of the year. Not a question, just indicative of a decrease, maybe in weddings in other contexts.

You know, what is the... is the wedding, is the wedding industry, you know, another way for the church to kind of support itself? Is it a natural tie-in to the song? Although, if the song is all about the death of a loved one, it might be.

CHRISTOPHER: Right. Yeah.

And this was something I had to process myself, is that in some ways, the rise of the church as a, kind of as the *New York Times* called it, "a matrimonial shrine," you know, the rise of the church in that way in some ways would seem to, like almost a return to the original meaning of that space.

But I think, like, if you ask most people, or if you, you know, in that final slide, I failed to mention that all of the images from the final slide where people who have tagged themselves at the Little Brown Church on Instagram. And if you look at, I just got a thumbs up from the AI, sorry. And if you look at, you know, the images and photos that are taking of that place, they're not going to that church and getting married because it's about a song about a dead woman in a cemetery.

They're going there because they think that the kind of, the rustic backdrop is somehow more true, more authentic than the artifice of modern life in urban spaces. And I think that's when... they're being... it is in some sense a return to the original lyrics. But the appeal of the place is because of the afterlife of that song more than its original thing.

And as far as why that happened, I really don't know. I mean, you can find as early as 1919, you will see articles in local newspapers saying that like all these people are getting married here. But there's like, nobody went out and advertised it. It wasn't seen as a way to try to make ends meet. It just became a naturally appealing place for folks in the region to get married. And I do wonder, maybe it's because it is the subtext of this song is why people are kind of drawn to it.

KYLE: So it seems fitting as a final question, as we all walk home from work, or drive home, or take the subway, what version of the song should we be listening to? What is your... You gave us so many great artists, but which do I listen to?

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah, I mean, you know, Excell's is my favorite because it is.... It's the, it's the truest to Pitts' version that updates the song without the more problematic, like, racial dynamics of some of the other versions. Like there's no, there's no, there's no war going on in Excell's version. It's, it is sort of a mourning, and that's the version my father sang to me, because it's the one that shows up in most hymnals. And so maybe that's the connection.

But I do think of, of all of them... because it is like we all, we all have to grow up and move away from home. And we have to process that. And I think the song can be a part of that for a lot of people. It was for me.

KYLE: And we don't have your father recorded, I expect, but should it be Dolly, or Ella, or the Statler Brothers?

CHRISTOPHER: Oh, man. So there's a, there's a country music group called Alabama that I grew up listening to. And they do a version of the song. That's my favorite version. Yeah. Alabama was playing on the cassette tape in my father's van for most of my childhood. So that's what I'll be listening to.

KYLE: Love it. Well, thank you for being so generous and sharing your scholarship with us and giving us this absolutely fascinating story that I don't think any of us quite saw coming. You know, we have this great icon, and we now appreciate it in such, such more richer ways. Thanks so much. Take care.

CHRISTOPHER: Thanks, everybody.