Brass bands were an important conveyor of both cultured and vernacular music to the populace of mid-nineteenth century America. Although their primary responsibility lay with performance of music for military ceremonies, brass bands also performed for dances and a variety of concert settings (such as serenades, promenades, and musical festivals). To provide repertoire for these venues, the bands drew upon pre-existing material from such genres as opera, sentimental songs, national airs, and minstrel tunes, as well as pieces written specifically for bands.

This study examined the subjective sources of diaries, letters, histories, newspapers, period journals, and reminiscences in order to identify the performance venues, genres, and repertoire of these bands. A comparison was then made between such subjective sources and the objective information found in the surviving band books and concert programs. The objective sources provide knowledge of the repertoire actually played by the bands, while the subjective sources recount what the audiences remembered of the repertoire.

As such, the newspapers emphasized the cultured repertorial genres, such as opera and orchestral literature, and the other subjective sources recalled the popular tunes, national airs, and personally favorite pieces performed by the bands. The objective sources of the band books and concert programs reveal a mixture of cultural and vernacular works, the majority of which was based on music originally written for other ensembles, such as sentimental songs, national airs, or opera.