

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: ERIN FULTON

Vestry Music and Vestry Meetings in New England, 1841–1848

(research director: Ron Pen)

Abstract

At least seven collections of sacred song purporting to anthologize “vestry music” or music “for the vestry” saw their initial compilation and publication in New England between 1841 and 1848. This repertoire of hymnody met the musical needs of the vestry meeting, a manner of informal devotion that came to prominence during the Boston revival of 1841–1842. None of the collections has received substantive scholarly consideration. The 1840s New England revivals and the forms of religiosity they prompted are similar lacunae within religious studies. These books record the musical and textual expressions of a devotional practice in specifically-identifiable times, places, spaces, and milieus. As such, they have the potential to elucidate little-studied areas in both musical and religious history.

The study will examine what was meant by “vestry music” and how the hymns and tunes anthologized in such collections functioned within religious praxis. Their musical and textual contents suggest why people could refer to *vestry music* as a generic category and the position of vestry music within mid-nineteenth-century American hymnody more broadly. The collections exemplify a mode of religious expression that contemporaries associated with the wave of revival in 1840s New England. Their prefatory content and musical characteristics indicate how devotees expected hymnody to function and how they actually employed it during social worship. Moreover, the content and practice of vestry music invoke issues central to this period of revival more broadly: lay and clerical power, appropriate functions for emotion, boundaries between sacred and secular space, and the role of divine action within everyday life.