History

What can we learn about a song from a picture, a printed page, and a sound recording? “When the Saints Go Marching In” is an African American spiritual that singers passed from voice to voice. The five sources below answer different questions about the song and the world in which people sang it.

Sources to investigate Read the descriptions, then open the items you want students to examine.

1863 · A funeral procession An engraving shows musicians walking ahead of Captain André Cailloux’s hearse in New Orleans. A newspaper correspondent reported hearing a dirge, a piece of mourning music, without naming the tune.

View the funeral engraving · Read the 1863 newspaper account

1896 · A hymn with a similar title Katharine E. Purvis wrote the words and James Milton Black composed the music for “When the Saints Are Marching In.” This is a separate hymn with its own melody.

Read the 1896 hymn

1923 · A group singing the spiritual The Paramount Jubilee Singers recorded voices and pump organ. Listen for the familiar refrain.

Hear the 1923 quartet

1927 · The spiritual on the printed page Edward Hammond Boatner published an arrangement in Spirituals Triumphant: Old and New. The staff notation and words preserve what singers could learn from this setting.

Find Boatner’s 1927 arrangement · No. 33

1938 · A jazz recording Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra recorded the spiritual for Decca. Listen to how Armstrong introduces the tune and how the instruments answer.

Hear Armstrong’s 1938 recording

Student investigation Choose one detail you can see in the engraving and one you can hear in either recording. Then decide whether the evidence supports this claim: “The band played this spiritual at Cailloux’s funeral.” Identify what additional evidence you would need.

Teacher key Both recordings let us hear the spiritual. Boatner’s score lets us read a version of it. The engraving depicts the procession, and the reporter identifies a dirge. Neither identifies the tune played in 1863.