

# Making of the 5-String Banjo: From Hollow Gourds to Silver Rims

Revised Draft by Paul Tyler 3/17/02

# Overview

- 1. What Makes a 5-String Banjo**
- 2. The 5-String Banjo: Made in the Americas (1680s - 1840s)**
- 3. Blacks, Whites and Banjos in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Re-making the Banjo (1810 -1880)**
- 4. The Samuel S. Stewart Collection: Factory-Made and Hand-Crafted (1870s - 1902)**
- 5. Material for listening station or interactive terminal (20<sup>th</sup> century)**

# 1. What Makes a 5-String Banjo

- **Membrane head stretched over circular rim**
- **Extended neck with flat fingerboard**
- **One short drone string**
- **Embellishments and decoration**

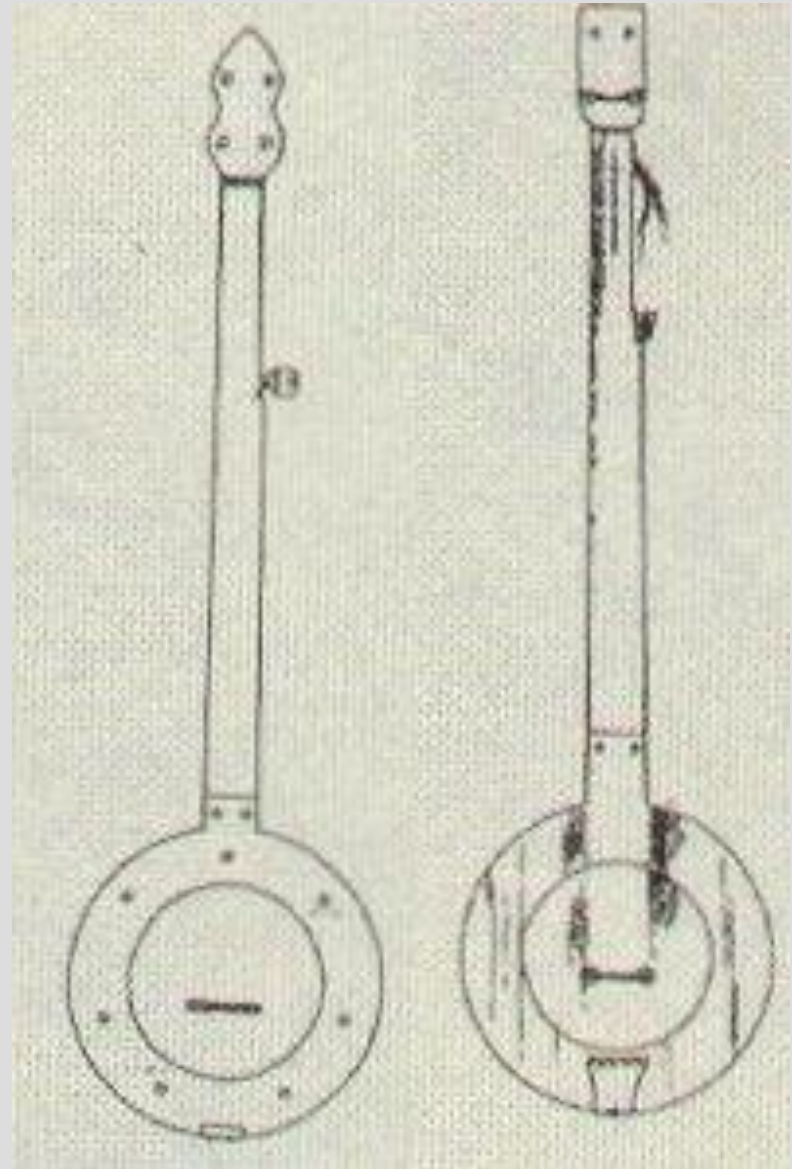
# What Makes a 5-String Banjo . . .



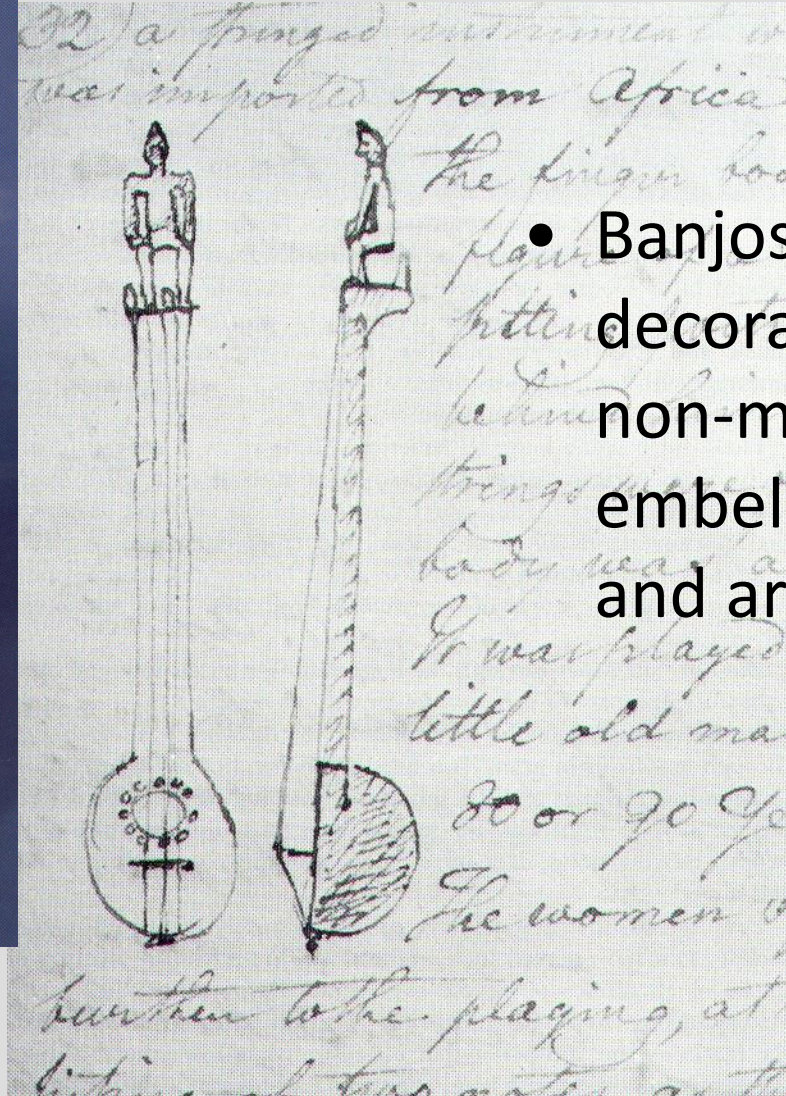
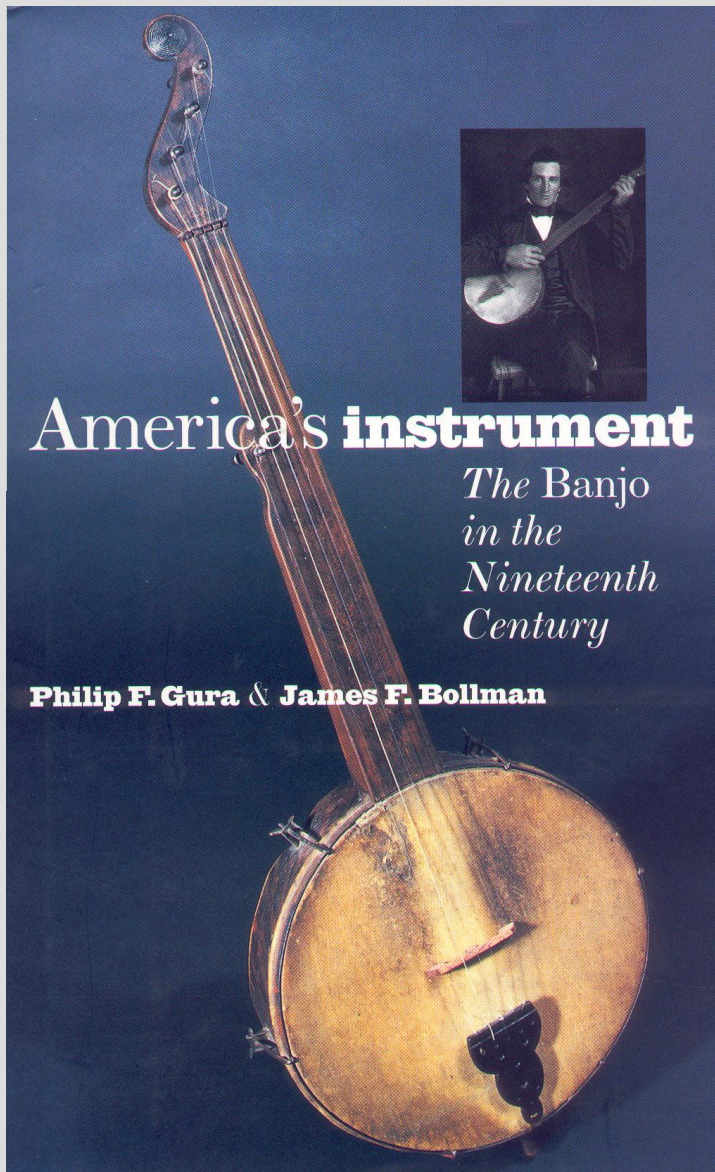
- A banjo has a round rim over which is stretched a skin or membrane head

... different from a guitar?

- with a protruding neck and fingerboard along which are stretched strings,
  - including one shortened drone string.



# Banjo-Making as Art



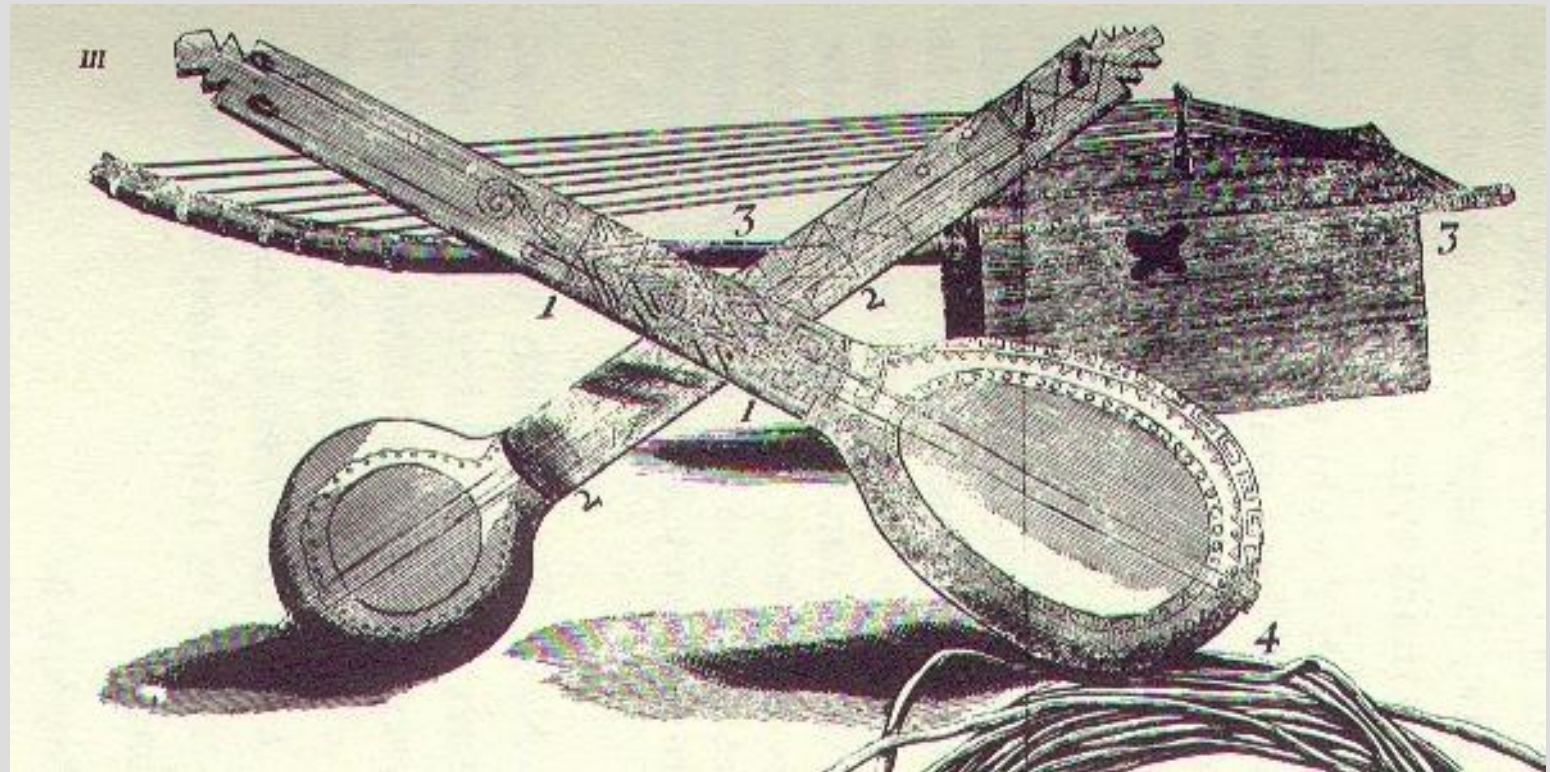
- Banjos are often decorated with non-musical embellishments and artwork.

## 2. The 5-String Banjo: Made in the Americas

*(1680s - 1840s)*

- **Cross-cultural roots: plucked lutes**
- **African roots – elements of the banjo**
- **Invented by African-Americans in widespread plantation cultures**

# The 5 [?] -String Banjo

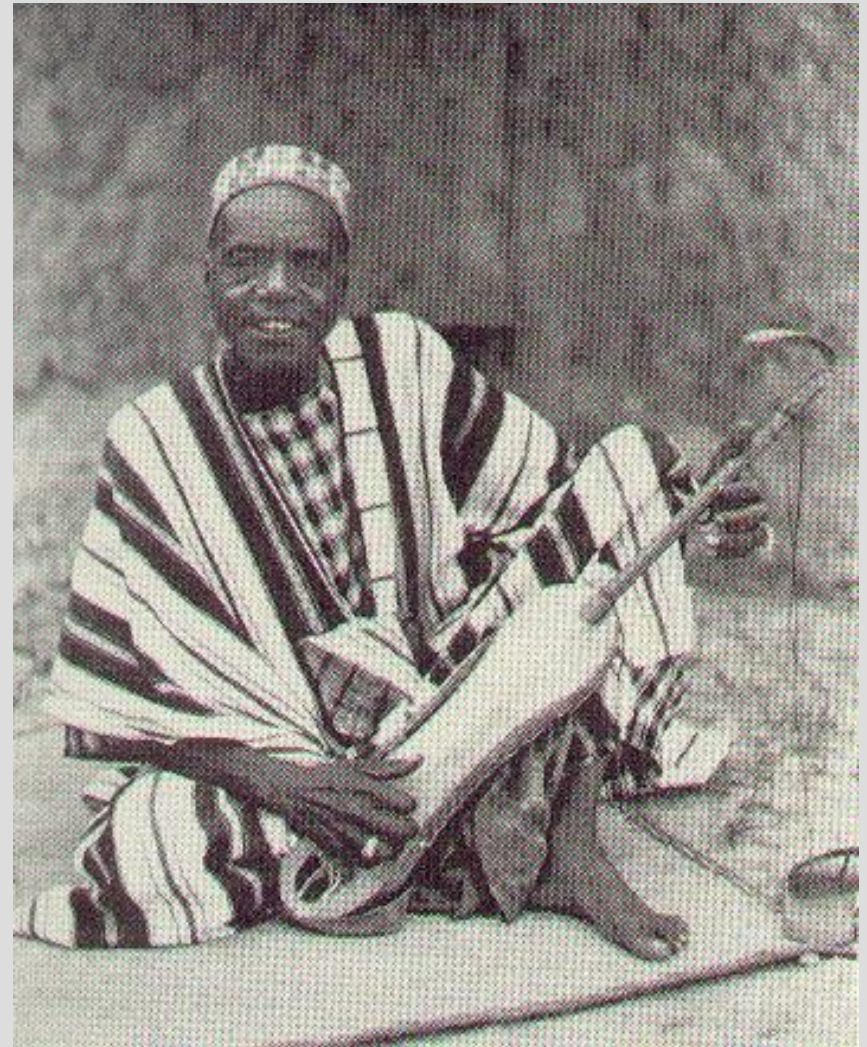


- Plucked lutes with membrane heads may be found around the world.



# Made in Africa?

- Different African plucked lutes featured various elements that make up a banjo.



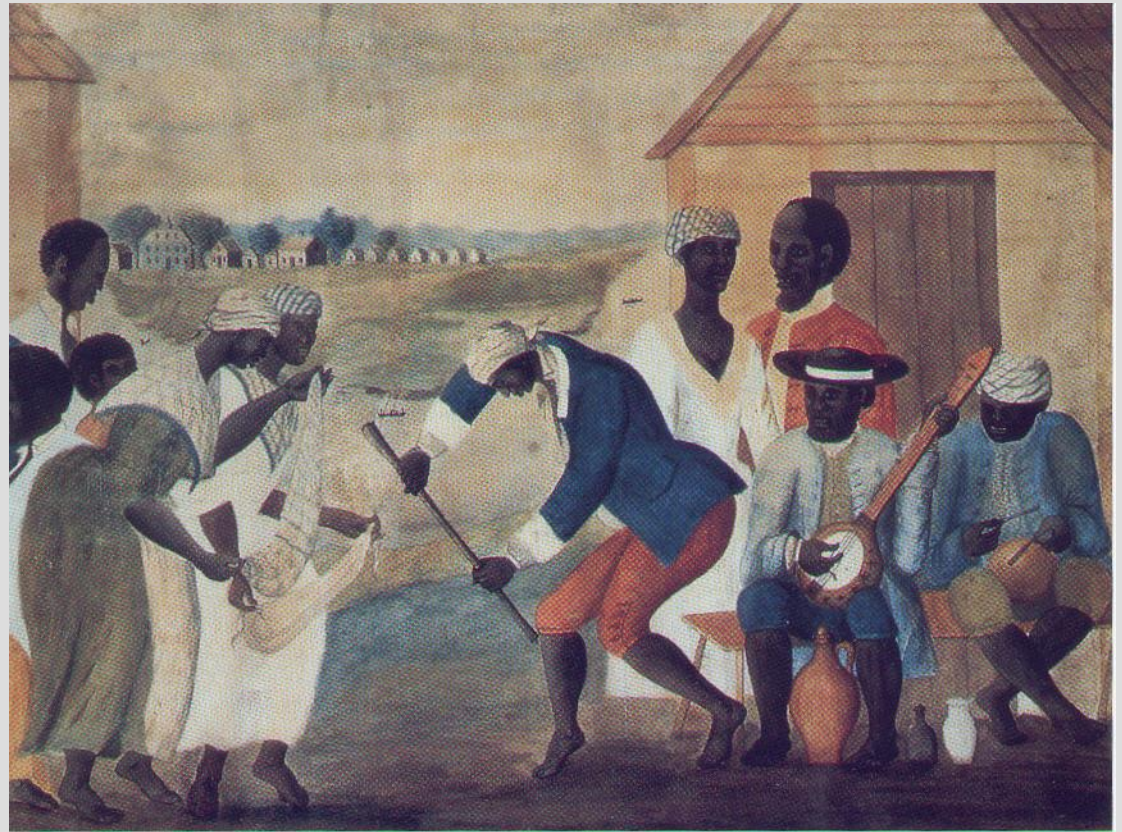
## A 4-String Banjo

- The banjo proper was a collective African-American invention,



# Made in America

- a reconfiguration of features that appeared in a variety of plantation settings in the Americas.



# 3. Blacks, Whites and Banjos in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Re-making the Banjo

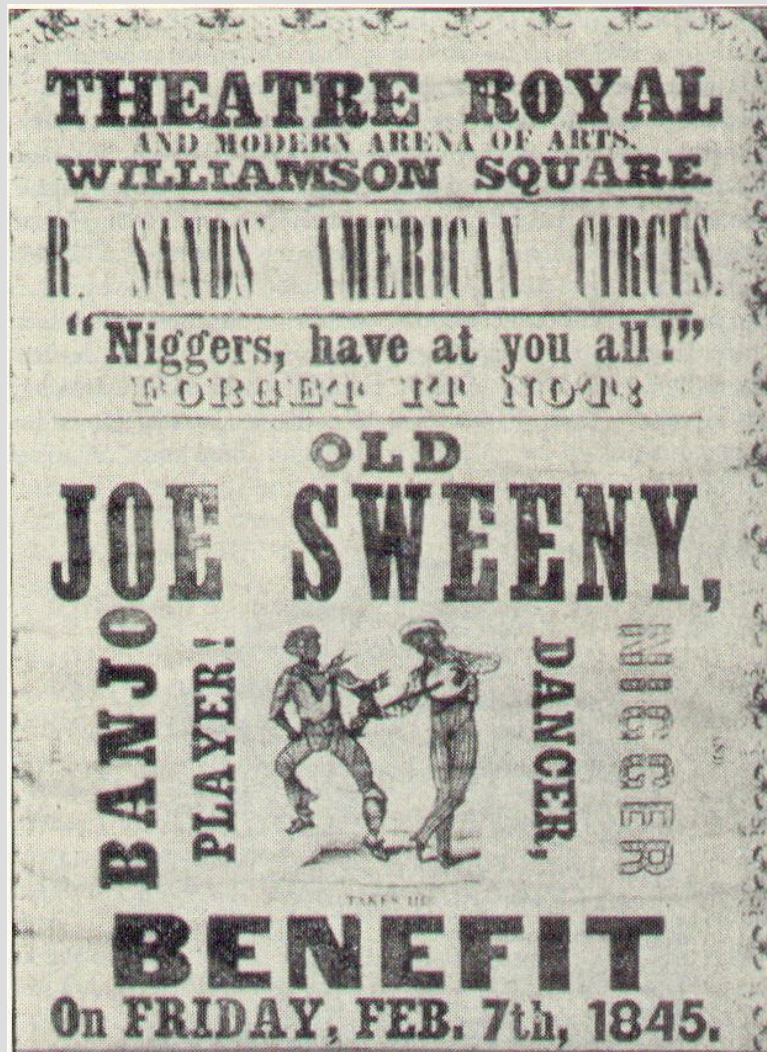
*(1810 - 1880)*

- **Minstrel banjos: commercial builders**
- **Professional banjoists: Blackface Minstrelsy**
- **Playing style: “stroke” playing and “clawhammer”**
- **Folk Banjoists**
  - **a continuing Afro-American tradition**
  - **newly-adopted Anglo-American tradition**

# Re-making the Banjo

- Meeting a new demand, wooden rim banjos began to be produced commercially by urban craftsmen.





## Whites in Blackface

- Black-face minstrelsy, America's first native popular theatre form, helped popularize the banjo among working-class and rural whites.

# Minstrels

- The minstrel “stroke” style and the folk “clawhammer”



style—in which the long strings are struck with the back of the fingernails in a downstroke—shows some similarities with African lute playing styles



## Blacks . . .

- In the early nineteenth century the banjo was predominant in Afro-American folk culture.



## & Whites



- Minstrel shows and musical interaction also motivated Anglo-American folk musicians to adopt the instrument.

# 4. The Samuel S. Stewart Collection: Factory-Made and Hand-Crafted

*(1870s - 1902)*

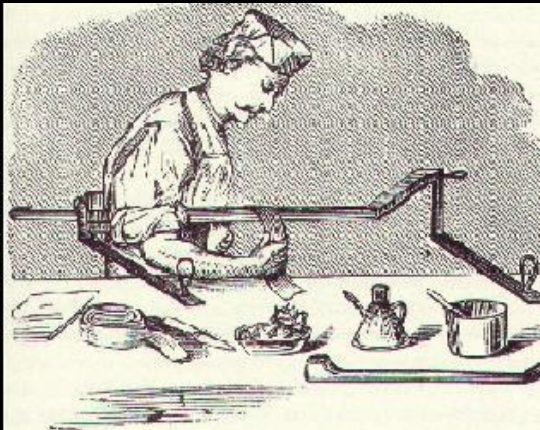
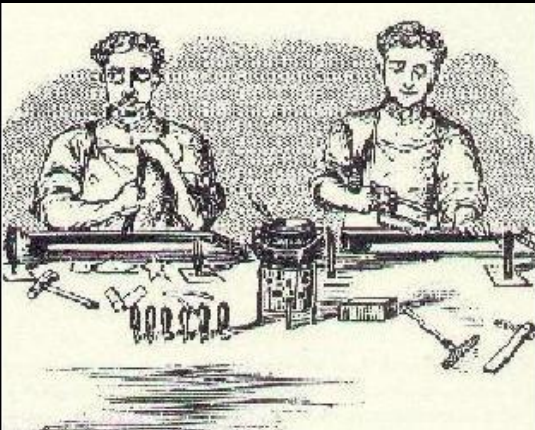
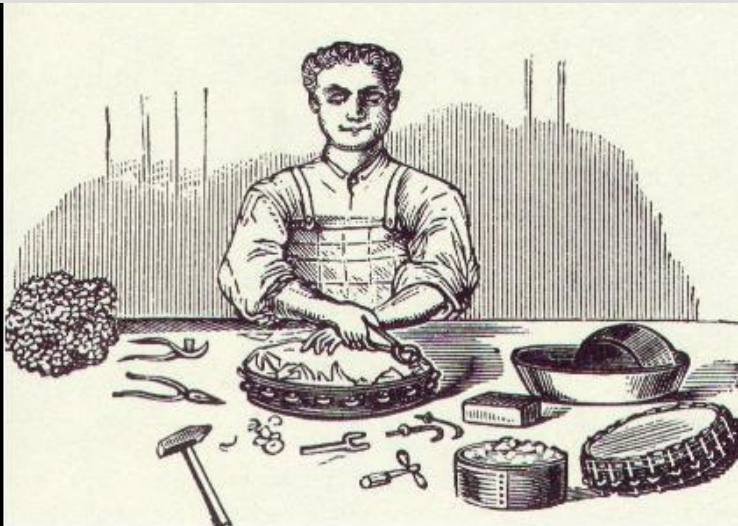
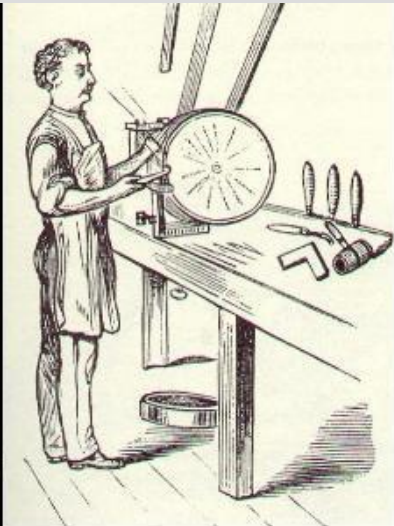
- Mass production
- Artful embellishment and craftsmanship
- Elevating the banjo musically
  - Accouterments
  - standard notation
  - new playing style: “guitar” or “finger-style”
- Other producers
  - Lyon & Healy
  - Fairbanks & Cole

# Samuel S. Stewart Factory

- The mass production of banjos  
–in a variety of sizes, grades, and  
types–made  
the instrument  
accessible and  
acceptable to  
most Americans.



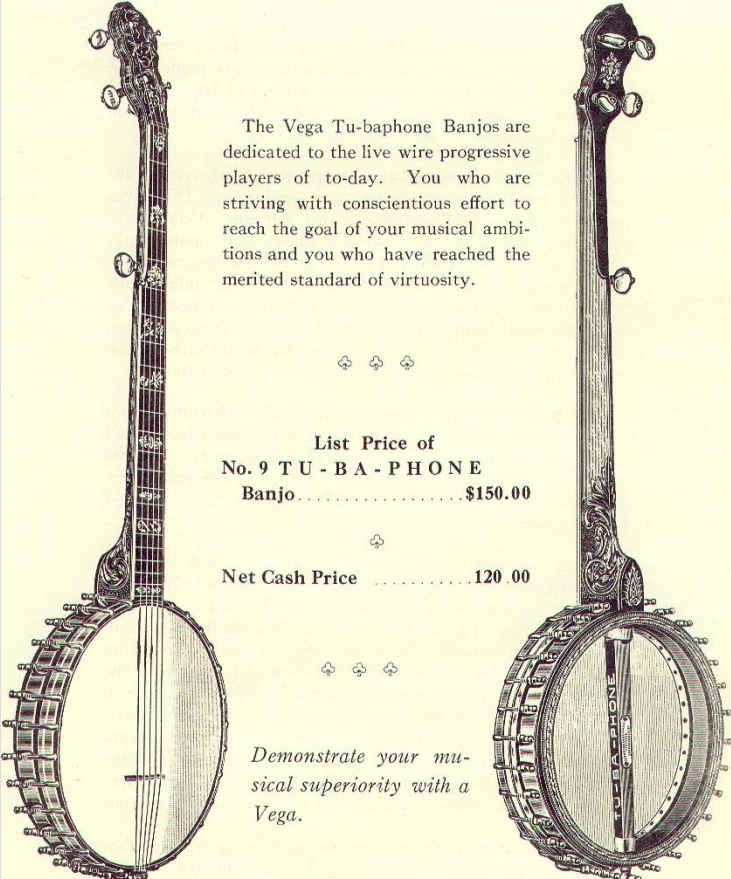
# Factory-Made



# Hand-Crafted

- But mass production did not mean a decline in authenticity, for makers like Samuel Swain Stewart of Philadelphia stressed fine craftsmanship and artistic embellishments.

Tu-ba-phone Banjo No. 9



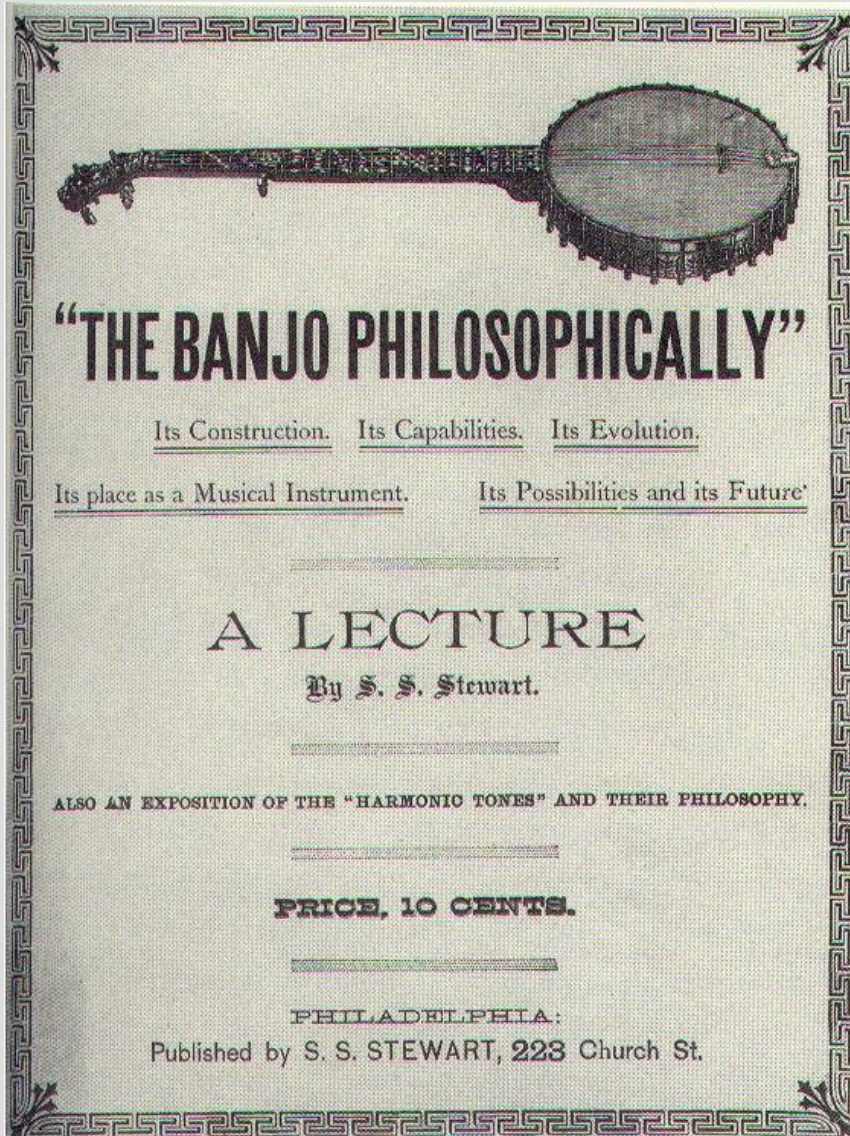
The Vega Tu-baphone Banjos are dedicated to the live wire progressive players of to-day. You who are striving with conscientious effort to reach the goal of your musical ambitions and you who have reached the merited standard of virtuosity.

◆ ◆ ◆

List Price of
No. 9 T U - B A - P H O N E
Banjo ..... \$150.00
◆
Net Cash Price ..... 120.00
◆ ◆ ◆

*Demonstrate your musical superiority with a Vega.*

— 11 —



## Elevating the Banjo

- Stewart's mission was to elevate the instrument to acceptance among the middle and upper classes. His innovations and promotions helped established the classical banjo orchestra, reliance on printed arrangements, and a new style of playing.

## Other Makers

- Other makers, in other cities, followed Stewart's lead. Some, particularly A.C. Fairbanks surpassed Stewart's artistic and technological achievements.

OTSFM



## 5. Material for listening station or interactive terminal

(20th century)

- Survival and Revival of the Folk Banjo
  - Old Time artists
  - Bluegrass artists
- Making and Remaking Folk Music
  - The Folk Revival
  - OTSFM connections