

## Articles from the "Lynchburg Virginian" Newspaper Regarding Joel Sweeney.

The Lynchburg Virginian, December 11, 1845- "Old Joe Sweeney"

*"This inimitable Banjo Player is to perform at the Theatre tonight, (Thursday.) He is a native born Virginian, reared in old Buckingham (soon to be Appomattox.) and after an absence of several years in Europe, where he performed to the astonishment of the Crowned heads there, he was returned among us, and will make his original Virginia instrument gladder the hearts of our citizens and convulge their sides with laughter. He has with him Frank Bower the greatest Ethiopian extravaganza extant.."*

The Lynchburg Virginian, July 2, 1848- "Appomattox"

*"There will be a Barbecue and Dinner in celebration of the 4<sup>th</sup>. Of July next, at Clover hill- at which time there will be a Sabbath School address, and procession of the different school- the Declaration of Independence read and an Address delivered on the occasion. A parade by the Troop and a band of music in attendance, by Joe Sweeney."*

The Lynchburg Virginian, September 4, 1860- "The Military of Appomattox"

*"For the last two days our county men have exhibited a military pride and spirit superior to that of days gone by, and in full keeping with the age and exigencies of the times.*

*Just at this moment, the men of the 174<sup>th</sup> ., Appomattox County Regiment are marching our streets, seated on horse-back and in vehicles, under the full influence of the drum, fife, banjo and violin, the Messrs. Sweeny (Robert\* and Samuel) occupying the most prominent position in the band of music. Their efforts on the violin and banjo stand unequaled, except by the world- renowned Joe Sweeney, who threw around the banjo the first halo of attraction and importance-demonstrating the fact that genius needs no royal instrument to excite the wonder and admiration of the world, for with the simple banjo, talented Joe secured the attention and presence of her Majesty, Queen Victoria. The Sweeneys are indeed a wonder!! A mere scientific in competition with them would be as little observed and respected as the chirping grasshopper amidst the booming cannon."*

\*Robert Sweeney was a cousin to Joel and his brothers.

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**  
**BUREAU OF VITAL RECORDS AND HEALTH STATISTICS**  
**RICHMOND, VIRGINIA**

Transcript of a record of death secured by the Commissioner of the Revenue between 1853 and 1896 as required by Chapter 104, Page 846, Section 21, Code of 1873, Acts of 1852, and now in the keeping of the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics, in accordance with Chapter 118, Page 226, Acts of 1918.

Place of death  
 County of Appomattox Page 155 Line No. 132  
 Magisterial  
 District of ----  
 or  
 City of ----

Name of deceased Joel W. Sweeney

Color White Sex Male Age 50 years

Date of death October 29, 1860 Place Appomattox

Cause of death Dropsy

Names of parents Jno. & T. Sweeney

Birthplace of deceased Buckingham

Occupation Musician

Consort of Unmarried

Name and relation of informant Allen Conner, Brother-in-law

Commissioner of the Revenue George T. Peers

Filed by the Clerk of the Court in the State office ----

I hereby certify that the above is a true copy of the record on file in the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics. Witness my hand and the seal of the Bureau of Vital Statistics at Richmond, Virginia, this 16 day of April, 1968.

*Mary L. Fisher*  
 Assistant State Registrar.

SWEENEY'S VIRGINIA MELODIES.



**JONNY BOKER.**  
**OR DE BROKEN YOKE IN DE COALING GROUND.**  
**THE ORIGINAL BANJO SONG**  
*As sung with great applause at the*  
**TREMONT THEATRE,**  
*BY*  
**J. W. SWEENEY.**

BOSTON.  
Published by HENRY PRENTISS, 33 Court St.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1836, by J. W. Sweeney, in the District Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

Or possibly only the fifth string

Folk Songwriters

# Gen. J. E. B. Stuart. Banjoist Joe Sweeney Collaborated on Songs



Joe Sweeney played the banjo while Gen. Stuart led the dance.

(Editor's Note: The author of the following article, Miss Vera Thomas, of Lynchburg, Va., originally comes from down Appomattox way, where one of the most colorful figures of all Southern musical history—Joe Sweeney, song-maker and inventor of the modern form of banjo—had his home. In fact, it is more than likely that some of Joe's descendants may be coming to the ninth National Folk Festival this year, which will be held at Constitution Hall May 6, 7, 8 and 9 [two performances each day] and which is sponsored by the Washington Folk Festival Association. They have been invited to appear on the programs.

(Miss Thomas is one of the most enthusiastic members of that band of American ballad-baggers that, by their interest in this cultural sport, are helping to make American musical history. Miss Thomas says in her letter accompanying the article:

"I hope you may be interested in Joe and his songs, for I feel that he is unique in what he has added to our folk songs, and that history has neglected him. Dying at a time when the whole South was all but dying, and in the most forlorn spot of the South, history was too busy with the 'lost cause' to bother about Joe and what he should mean to posterity. When I first had an article such as this in Holland's Magazine about Joe Sweeney I received letters from many parts of the country, some remembering tales and snatches of songs handed down by their parents and grandparents, and one old lady in her nineties, desolate over the fate of 'that gay Joe Sweeney' whom she remembered as the life of the party on those all-night dances led by dashing Jeb Stuart—the Fred Astaire of those days and close friend and collaborator of Joe Sweeney.")

By Vera Thomas

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"Won't You Come Out Tonight?", "I Would Not Live Always" and "Old Joe Hooker, Won't You Come Out of the Wilderness?" Besides being a dancer,



MISS THOMAS

Jeb Stuart was a singer with rich baritone quality, and on Sundays, according to a recent book by Capt. John W. Thomason, jr., Stuart led the congregation in the grand old hymns just as enthusiastically as on Saturday nights he led the young people in their famous dances, and Joe Sweeney tamed his saucy banjo to the tempo of religious songs.

Capt. Thomason also describes in his book how Joe Sweeney and his banjo accompanied the Confederate forces: "Sweeney was at once detailed to the Escort, and where Jeb Stuart went, he went with his banjos and his ditties. The byways of Virginia heard old joyous snatches ringing above the thudding of the horses' hoofs.

Few folks who knew Joe Sweeney personally, remain to tell their stories of those times, yet his fame seems to be in-

creasing rather than diminishing with the passing of years. Most recently a "Joe Sweeney Band" has sprung up in Appomatox to perpetuate his memory and his lively tunes.

Perhaps best remembered by the few remaining Graycoats is his song written for the cavalry of the Confederate forces which swept the ranks like a contagion:

*"If you want to smell hell,  
If you want to have fun,  
If you want to catch the devil,  
Join the Cavalry."*

Joe Sweeney's name will not be found in written history, encyclopedias or the annals of musical genius. The banjo does not lend itself to classical music. It was to the Old South what the balalaika has been to the peasants of rural Russia. The banjo is really a peasant instrument. The earliest banjos were made by slaves on the plantations and were only four stringed. It remained for Joe Sweeney to invent the banjo as it is known today and add that fifth string that made for so much more harmony. Sweeney knew his medium, the limitation of his banjo, and as composer and performer recognized these things and so excelled in his field. It was songs of the poor whites and the Negroes that he used and the tunes for square dances that he wrote.

### Ninety Years Too Soon

His pal, Jeb Stuart (whose romance was material for Robert W. Chambers in his book, "Operator 13," in which the banjo-playing Sweeney is a constant shadow in every appearance of

Stuart) put his mind along with Sweeney when the Civil War came along and a wealth of entertaining songs resulted. There was no organized entertainment in the C. S. A. as in the A. E. F. of World War I. Sweeney was not to win fame for any military exploit yet Fate in a strange fashion linked his name inseparably with any real history of that War Between the States.

As a matter of fact Joe Sweeney was born about 90 years too soon—as is the case of many men of genius in all fields. For it is only recently that Negro music has come into its own with Spirituals, Mammy Songs and Blues.

Joe Sweeney was born on a plantation destined to be known some day as the "Surrender Grounds." He inherited directly from his mother's people a real passion for tune and rhythm. It is told how he used to hang around the Negro cabins and listen in delight to the thrum of their crude banjos and the songs they sang before the cabin door. The mysterious moon would sweep slowly up into the sky, and etched against its orange disk would be the palm-like fronds of the paradise trees. Time didn't exist. Why sleep when one already was in a blissful delirium of dreaming? The little country boy saturated his soul with music under the soft southern skies.

Early in life Joe gravitated naturally to the stage. He took two brothers with him, one of them, Sam taking his violin. The three of them blacked their faces and developed an act playing and singing plantation songs with all the mannerisms

peculiar to poor whites and the Negroes among whom they had grown up. It was something new and a gold mine for them. The Southerner in those days was a novelty in the North, and Joe portrayed the drollery and romantic sides of plantation life to the Yankees.

### Honored by Queen

This Southern lad was to have honors outside his native land, for as the old folk in the county tell us, the highlight of his career was his command performance at the Court of Queen Victoria of England. He so pleased Her Royal Highness that she offered him a position as entertainer—according to the story. He told her about the "girl back home." The Queen understood and heaped gifts upon Virginia's nineteenth-century troubadour and bade him Godspeed back to his native land. She gave him a banjo of rare wood inlaid with ivory, a money belt with gold coin from the royal treasury, a brooch set in onyx and earrings to match for the "girl back home." A grandniece of Joe Sweeney's today treasures a quaint old trunk bearing his initials which he took with him on the voyage when he played before World Personality No. 1 of those days—Queen Victoria!

Naturally this command performance abroad increased his fame here. He began to collect fine furniture for the home for his bride-to-be. He traveled in a fine black carriage drawn by coal-black horses. He was a true showman, and grown-ups and children alike were his friends. His fame traveled

ahead of him. One day, stopping by a cabin in a strange neighborhood, he saw a banjo on a bed inside.

"What's that?" said Joe Sweeney.

"A banjo," answered the woman who owned the cabin.

"Banjo? I'd like to hear it. Who plays it?"

The woman stepped to the little cabin's back door.

"Come here, John, and play your banjo for the gentleman!"

A small boy about 12 years old played a tune. Then audience turned performer and Joe played "Run, Nigger, Run," and "Old Dan Tucker," and the boy's eyes popped and the woman's face shone with smiles.

"I know!" she said, "You needn't tell me! You can't be anybody but Joe Sweeney!"

Then came the war. Joe's brother, Samuel, contracted smallpox and died. The Confederate army, worn down by hunger and long fighting, was prey to many diseases. Joe caught measles which developed into serious lung trouble, and he had to be discharged from the army at the beginning of the third year of war.

No more dreams of music and dancing—and no bride! In those days tuberculosis meant certain death. Joe came back to the place he had furnished with such happiness for his bride. The stars had fixed the destiny of the Minstrel of Appomatox and the Fates clipped the thread. In his room that, in a few months, was to be a Confederate hospital, on a plantation that was to see many incidents of The Surrender, Joe Sweeney made his personal surrender and held his rendezvous with death.



M

68

## POPULARIZER OF THE BANJO

Nearby is buried Joel Walker Sweeney (ca. 1810-1860), the musician who redesigned this African instrument into the modern five-string banjo that is known today. Although slaves apparently added the fifth string to what had been a four-string instrument, Sweeney popularized the new form on the minstrel circuit. He toured with his two brothers, Sam and Dick, in minstrel shows from 1831 until his death in 1860. During the Civil War, Sam Sweeney served as Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's personal banjo picker until Sweeney's death in the winter of 1863-1864.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORIC RESOURCES, 1997



**Burke Davis.** JEB Stuart- The Last Cavalier, Rinehart & Co., Inc. New York 1957

“ But Stuart must have more music. He coveted a banjo player in the Appomattox County regiment of Colonel T.T. Munford, one Sam Sweeney, a dark, handsome man in his early thirties who made such music as Stuart had never heard. Sam Sweeney was the younger brother of Joe Sweeney, said to be the “inventor” of the banjo . . . Joe had died before, and now Sam carried on his minstrelsy. Stuart abducted him.

Colonel Munford left a plaint.

“Stuarts feet would shuffle at Sweeney’s presence, or naming. He issued an order for him to report at his quarters and “detained” him “ . . .

So there was always music. Sweeney on the banjo, Mulatto Bob on the bones, a couple of fiddlers, Negro singers and dancers, the ventriloquist and others who caught Stuart’s eye. Sweeney rode with Stuart on the outpost day and night. Stuart often sang and Sweeney plucked the strings behind him. . . .

. . . Stuart had the staff busy. Sam Sweeney left on some errand, and a young woman, riding a public coach in the Shenandoah Valley, had a vivid recollection of the musician: “Never shall I forget that moonlight stage ride to Harrisonburg. There were three ladies and four gentlemen on the inside and three on top of the stage, one of whom was General Stuart’s banjoist. His music was so bright and gay, that I could not keep my feet still.”

**CHARLESTON MERCURY**, January 16, 1863, p. 1, c. 2-3

Richmond, Tuesday, January 13.

. . . Are your readers aware that Gen. J.E.B. Stuart carries with him wherever he goes, in all his circuits and raids, a brother of Joe Sweeney, the famous banjo player? Such is the fact. Sweeney is also a banjoist, and Stuart calls him his band. He carries his banjo behind his saddle, wrapped up in a piece of oil cloth, and whenever the cavalry stop, even to water their horses, the band strikes up on the banjo and picks a merry air. The performance of the banjo band in Pennsylvania drove several Dutch farmers raving distracted, for Sweeney swore that his banjo strings were made out of the viscera of their departed relatives and friends!



**J.E.B. Stuart**, in a letter to his wife Flora, January 30, 1864

"I Suppose you heard the sad tidings of poor Sweeney's death. He died of small-pox while I was gone. His loss is deeply felt."

(Confederate.)

S | 2 Cav. | Va.

S. D. Sweeney  
Siv, Co. H, 2 Reg't Virginia Cavalry.

Appears on

**Company Muster Roll**

of the organization named above,

for Nov. & Dec., 1862.

Enlisted:

When Jan 1., 1862.

Where

Centerville

By whom St. Poore

Period 3 m.

Last paid:

By whom Capt Frank

To what time Oct. 31, 1862.

Present or absent Absent

Remarks: Detailed for duty  
at Gen. Stewart's Hd qrs.  
Dec 1.

Field officers for the 2d Regiment Virginia Cavalry (also known as the 30th Regiment Virginia Volunteers) were appointed May 8, 1861, and the ten companies, A to K, of which it was composed were enlisted for one year on various dates from May 11 to June 8, 1861. It was originally in the service of the State of Virginia but was accepted into the service of the Confederate States on July 1, 1861, and was reorganized under the Re-enlistment Act, April 24, 1862.

Book mark:

Rip Fish

(CONFEDERATE.)

S | 2 Cav | Va

S. D. Sweeney  
Pot Co. H. 2 Reg't Va Cav

Name appears on a

**Register\***

of Officers and Soldiers of the Army of the Confederate States who were killed in battle, or who died of wounds or disease.

Where born

When deceased Jan 13, 1864.

Where and from what cause Hospl

Orange C. H.

Amount of money left 26.00

Effects

In whose charge Hospital

When received Jan 16, 1864.

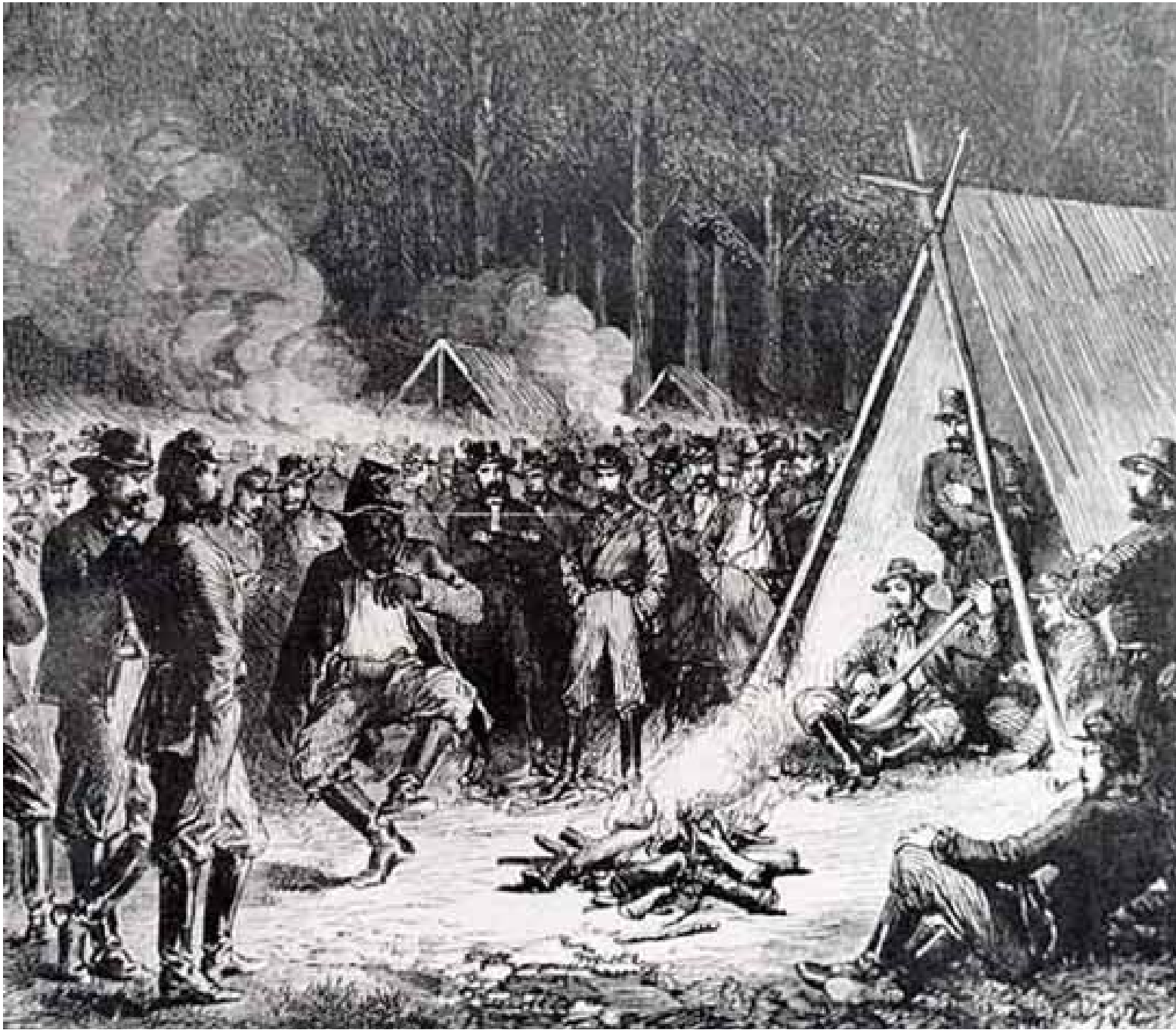
Number of certificate 295

Remarks:

\*This register appears to have been compiled in the Adjutant and Inspector General's Office from returns furnished by Hospitals and by Regimental and Company Officers.

Confed. Arch., Chap. 10, File No. 8, page 234

N. L. Ray



This drawing by Frank Vizetelly appeared in the "Illustrated London News" in 1862 and depicts Sam Sweeney (seated in tent) playing



**Notices at the Congressional Cemetery Where Richard Sweeney is buried.**

**Sweeney, Richard A.** d. 10 Feb 1859 32 yrs.

Sweeney. On the night of the 10th instant, after a brief illness of disease of the lungs, Richard A. Sweeney, aged 32 years, late Manager of the Sweeney Troupe. His funeral will take place from the residence of F. Zimmerman, on H street north, between 5th and 6th streets west, at 10 o'clock a.m. on Sunday morning, the 13th inst.

*The Evening Star, February 12, 1859*

*Sudden Deaths*

Dick Sweeney, a favorite performer of Joe Sweeney's Burlesque Opera Troupe, died suddenly at his boarding house in this city the night before last from hemorrhage(sic) of the lungs.

