



Going Down to Cairo

The Cairo referred to in the song was Cairo, IL. It has all the earmarks of being an antebellum minstrel show song. There are only a handful of folk songs native to the state of Illinois, and “Goin’ Down to Cairo” (pronounced Kay-ro) is one of them. It’s a song that is performed as a “singing game,” with accompanying steps similar to that of a square dance. Cairo, Illinois sits at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and the story behind “Goin’ Down to Cairo” goes back to the late summer 1858 when an early frost killed all the corn and tobacco in Southern Illinois.

As the crops south of the Ohio River had not been damaged at all, planters from that region sent a portion of their harvest up river to be sold in Cairo, IL. Men journeyed to Cairo, many arriving several days before the boats came in with cargo. R.B. Shelton, a native to the area remembers: “It was pretty hard to find a good place to pass the time away so the men began going into saloons and various other places to be entertained. Wives noticed on return trips that their husbands had ‘blacked their boots’ and were dressed up a great deal more than usual and they had been making frequent trips to Cairo.

“Many fabulous tales were told about the men having a ‘Liza Jane’ that they were interested in. As a result of this, wives began accompanying their husbands and the manner of entertainment in Cairo was somewhat changed.

I'm goin' down to Cairo,
Goodbye, magpie;
Goin' down to Cairo,
To see my Liza Jane.

“Black them boots and make 'em shine
Goodbye, goodbye
Black them boots and make 'em shine
Goodbye, Liza Jane”

“Charlottestown is burning down
Goodbye, goodbye
Burning down to the ground
Goodbye Liza Jane.”