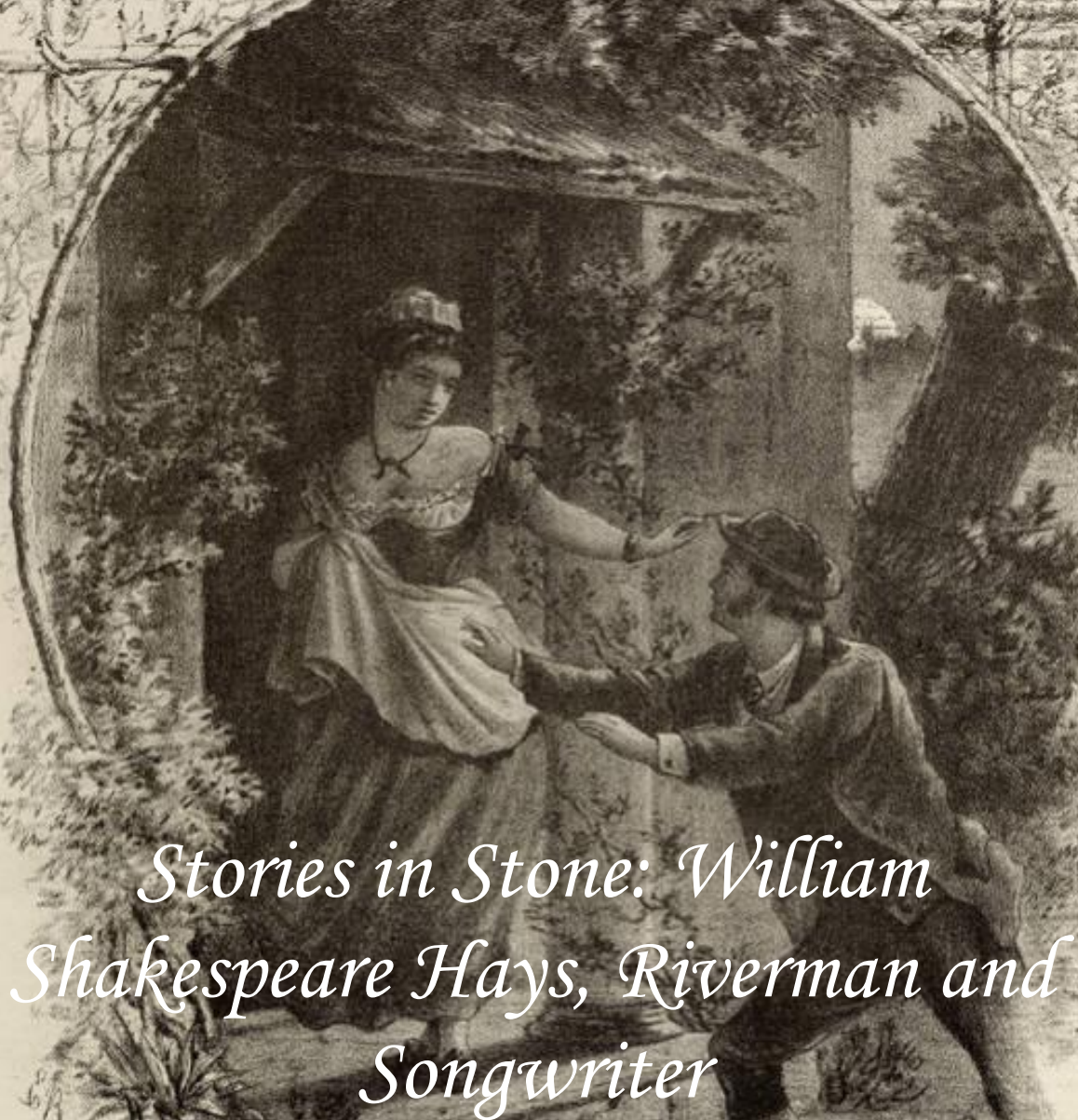


MOLLIE DARLING

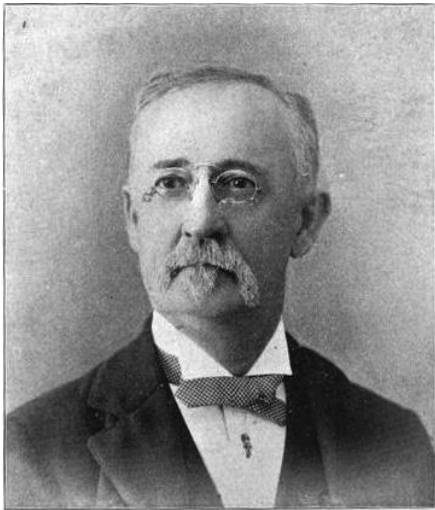


*Stories in Stone: William
Shakespeare Hays, Riverman and
Songwriter*

Cover from Mollie Darling. Wikipedia, 2023.

By Alex Luken, Cave Hill Heritage Foundation

William S. Hays, a popular songwriter and steamboat captain in the nineteenth century, is buried at Cave Hill Cemetery, Section 5, Lot 254, but his fame lives on through his songs. His most popular song, [“Mollie Darling.”](#) sold over 1 million copies in 1871. The song is mentioned in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and continues to be played today. As a young man, Hays earned the nickname of



William S. Hays, 1895. Wikipedia.

“Shakespeare” from his friends because of his poetry-writing skill. He loved the nickname enough to formally add it to his name, becoming William “Shakespeare” Hays.

Hays was born July 19, 1837, in Louisville, Kentucky, the son of Hugh and Martha Hays. From 1856 through 1857, he attended colleges in Hanover, Indiana; Clarksville, Tennessee; and Georgetown, Kentucky. Drawn to the river, he found employment as a shipping clerk. He later became a steamboat captain on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

In 1857, Hays began writing music for David P. Faulds, a prominent Louisville music publisher, to supplement his income. His musical talent was a perfect complement to his

style of poetic writing and led to him becoming one of the most prolific songwriters of the 19th century. Yet he considered songwriting a hobby and not his profession.

Hays later became “River Editor” for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*. His column frequently included pieces of his own sentimental verse, which were republished in papers across the United States. Hays sometimes published his work under pen names, such as Syah, which is Hays spelled backwards.

Hays is credited with publishing lyrics for more than 350 songs in his lifetime. His compositions ranged from solemn religious hymns to gay minstrel tunes. Some of his most popular compositions were “parlour songs,” similar in style to the music of Stephen Foster. His first published song was “Little Ones at Home,” written during his time at Hanover College in Indiana.

Hays claimed to have written the lyrics to the Southern anthem “Dixie” in 1858, a year before it was first performed by Bryant’s Minstrels, though his claim was never substantiated. The melody Hays wrote for “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” has been used in Western songs and railroad songs and as the tune for the popular gospel hymn “The Lily of the Valley.” Singers who performed his songs included Bill Monroe, Wade Mainer, the Carter Family, the Stanley Brothers, and Lester Flatt.

When Hays died, in 1907, his obituary appeared in newspapers across the country. He was lauded as a “noted riverman, poet, and musician” and called “poet of the poor.” As a composer of popular sentimental songs, Hays made a lasting contribution to American music.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/119185454/?terms=%22will%20s%20hays%22>

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<https://hvbluegrass.org/william-shakespeare-who-the-deep-roots-of-bluegrass-songs/>