

# Script for the Chorus of the Old Dominion performance marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Balls Bluff, a national Civil War cemetery in Leesburg, VA

## Suggested order of songs:

TITLE	Condensed Version of Introduction
<b>O Shenandoah</b>	The longing... the homesickness... the river taking us farther still from home and loved ones. Tie in to Shenandoah Valley, where many Civil War battles occurred.
<b>An Irish Blessing</b>	The realities of exposure to the wind, the sun, the rain, vulnerability, and wish for safety until we meet again. Tie in to the numerous Irish Americans who fought in the war, as evident by a monument at Gettysburg.
<b>Aura Lee</b>	Sentimental song of forlorn love that was a favorite of soldier trainees and others on both the North and South sides.
<b>The Story of the Rose (Heart of My Heart)</b>	Old-fashioned love song that perhaps best summarizes the love letters and poems that soldiers both sent and received while serving in the military.
<b>The Star-Spangled Banner</b>	Although originating in War of 1812, our national anthem is a song of strength, resilience and hope amid a battle that threatens our unity and our national vision.
<b>Ain't A That Good News</b>	A traditional negro spiritual that expresses a joy that these struggles will not last forever... that freedom will come, if not in this life then in the next.
<b>America, the Beautiful</b>	Patriotic song that came along after the Civil War that perhaps helped Americans recapture what was good and true about this blessed land. Even as the hundreds of thousands of soldiers came from all the various states, this was a land that's very goodness was ultimately based on a "brotherhood."

## Full Script:

---

### The story of music in the day-to-day lives of Civil War soldiers...

We are the Chorus of the Old Dominion. We are honored to be here to mark the significance of what happened here at Balls Bluff 150 years ago. In anticipation of that battle's re-enactment, we want to, perhaps, help set the stage for what is to come. Life as a Civil War soldier... what was it like? When not in battle, some spent the required time to clean their guns or preparing in other ways. Some perhaps wrote letters to their loved ones. Some casually conversed with other soldiers from other parts of the country, or played cards and others, at least occasionally, joined in to listen to music.

The soldiers probably had few, if any, musical instruments -- it was their vocal music, their singing, that kept them company in the fields, moving from one region to another, etc. Perhaps when they awaited official orders from Richmond or from Washington, one man would start up a song and two or three or more would join in. It lifted their spirits, transported them away from battlefields, helped them forget about the sores caused by poorly fitting boots, lessened their fears even while hearing the sound of cannon fire in the distance.

#### O SHENANDOAH

The longing ... the homesickness... even the river taking us farther still from home and loved ones. One sentimental favorite tune was the American folk song *O Shenandoah*, which dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are various interpretations of the meaning; the one tied to the Civil War was of a Union soldier, dreaming of his country home to the west of the Missouri river, in Shenandoah, Iowa. The song is also associated with escaped slaves, who according to historian sang the song in gratitude because the river allowed their scent to be lost from their pursuers. We Virginians also like to associate it with the battles that occurred up and down the Shenandoah Valley, just west of here. Regardless of its actual storyline, the beloved tune conjures up a longing for what's behind us and what's ahead of us, and it uses words that would have even made sense at the Battle of Balls Bluff: "O Shenandoah, I long to see you..." And the last verse: "Farewell, my love, I'm bound to leave you ... away you rollin' river ... away you rollin' river."

#### AN IRISH BLESSING

Among those on that journey were the Irish-Americans. The Irish experience in the Civil War has probably received more attention — and celebration — than any other ethnic group besides the African-American soldiers who fought and died (which we will discuss later). From Fredericksburg to Gettysburg, the Irish were definitely in the mix. There is even a monument to the Irish Brigade on the historic fields of Gettysburg. Having arrived initially in a huge wave in America before 1855 because of the Irish Potato Famine, the Irish found themselves mostly living in the North, and yet concerned about competing with free blacks and the thought of the end of slavery. Nevertheless, the firing on Fort Sumter and President

Lincoln's call for volunteers evoked a sense of patriotism to the Union that was fanned by Irish newspapers and political and religious leaders. The Irish were said to be the most politically active — and contentious — of the nation's mid-19th-century immigrant groups. Eventually some 140,000 Irish-born soldiers served in the Federal armies. Even though Union leaders were reluctant to form ethnically based brigades, which seemed at odds with the vision of “Union,” by mid-1861 the formation of an Irish brigade served to solidify Irish support. This next song, *An Irish Blessing*, recalls for us the experience by the Irish -- and all soldiers -- who were there and who traveled those dirt roads, who felt the wind, and the sun, and the rain ... and who wished upon their brothers in arms, while uncertain of their fate, that “until we meet again, may God hold you in his hand.”

### AURA LEE

Soldiers sang sentimental tunes that reflected their homesick feelings, songs of their hopes and dreams, even songs of distant love ... like *Aura Lee*. This song was copyrighted in 1861, the year of the start of the War Between the States, and the year we look back to today. It gained popularity among trainee soldiers at West Point and eventually became a favorite for troops on both sides of the conflict. True to its sense of the American experience, the tune was borrowed by a young Elvis Presley a little more than a century later. Our version today reflects both aspects of this lovely old tune.

### THE STORY OF THE ROSE

The hoping and longing to be reunited with loved ones was on every soldier's mind and heart. Who knows what fate awaited him the next day? So while the soldiers served bravely, they made sense of the dangerous missions, difficult conditions and even the dying happening around them by finding a moment here or there to remember a wife or girlfriend or their mothers so far away. They would write letters, and often lines of poetry expressing their love. And perhaps such a note would sound something like this... which goes by the popular title *Heart of My Heart*.

### THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

Although written about a previous war -- the War of 1812 -- our National Anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, was a tune of strength and honor amid the battle. And even though the Confederate soldiers would have disagreed with the national unity expressed in its lyrics, they would have still seen afresh what it means to stand your ground, to fight for what you believe in in hopes of protecting your way of life. And on this side of the Civil War, we still rally around this song as a way to see how even our differences have helped make us stronger as a nation, and how the American flag still flies “over the land of the free and the home of the brave.” As is customary, please stand in reverence.

### AIN'T A THAT GOOD NEWS

This next song – *Ain't A That Good News* -- is a traditional negro spiritual that expresses a joy that these struggles will not last forever... that freedom will come, if not in this life then in the next. Traditional spirituals are said to be the first uniquely American music. They are songs of hope that are rich in meaning and deeply emotional and expressive, and are a testament to the strength and tenacity of the

African people who adapted to and enriched all of American culture. Everyday situations usually comprised the subject matter of their songs. "I got a home ... a robe ... a crown ... when I lay down this world... and that's good news."

### **AMERICA, THE BEAUTIFUL**

*America, the Beautiful* is a patriotic song that came along after the Civil War, but it probably helped Americans and a nation in recovery recapture what was good and true about this blessed land they call home. It first appeared as a poem which were later used as lyrics and turned into the song we know today. And like the Civil War was touched lives in numerous states, the beloved song revisits such places as Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Tennessee, the Atlantic ocean and all points west, and both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. Surely this is where the soldiers on both sides of the conflict hailed from. It was a land, after all, that's very goodness was based on a so-called "brotherhood." This song concludes our part of the presentation today.

**[No words after final song. Group descends the stage.]**