

MISSISSIPPI SAWYER

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The popular Old Time tune, Mississippi Sawyer, is thought to have evolved from the British Isles tune, The Downfall of Paris, and is still known by that name in some parts of America, mainly Tennessee and the Ozark region.¹ The tune apparently goes back further in that it can be traced back to the French Revolution (c. 1780) as *Ça Ira* or *les aristocrats a la lanterne* (translated as ‘aristocrats to the lamp-post’ roughly ‘let’s lynch the aristocrats’).² In America, it appears in print in Knauff’s tune collection, **Virginia Reels** Vol 4, No 4 (Baltimore, 1839) as Love from the Heart, but notably Knauff’s tune Mississippi Sawyer in Vol 1, No 7, is a different tune all together.³

A ‘Mississippi Sawyer’ is the term for submerged tree stumps that were uprooted by flooding along the Mississippi River. These stumps then catch on passing riverboats making a difficult journey that much more hazardous. American writer and humorist, Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835 – 1910), named his famous fictional character, Tom Sawyer, after this river menace.⁴

—Kitty Steetle

¹[https://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Downfall_of_Paris_\(The\)](https://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Downfall_of_Paris_(The))

²It is not often that tunes are popular among both the Irish and English, but when explained through the lens of ‘violent revolutionary’ it starts to make sense. You may find it interesting to listen to The Dubliner’s version of The Downfall of Paris and think to yourself, ‘This sweet loping tune was a bloody revolution song?! That’s crazy talk!’

³Unfortunately, I could not find a facsimile of the complete Knauff’s **Virginia Reels** available online. But all four volumes are available in the appendix of Goertzen’s **George P. Knauff’s Virginia Reels and the History of American Fiddling** (Jackson, MS, 2017).

⁴[https://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Mississippi_Sawyer_\(1\)](https://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Mississippi_Sawyer_(1))