Not so differently, during the late nineteenth century “Backside Albany” became alternately a joke and an embarrassment to the sophisticated scholars who stressed the ambivalence and multivocality of blackface minstrelsy in its formative years. The song elicited such scholarly schadenfreude because, although it initiated the rapid expansion of a distinct genre or repertoire with racial denigration as its core (or, more importantly, at its performative surface), the tune hardly appears to be about race or black people at all. For what it is about, indisputably, is the War of 1812: the seemingly whitest war in American history. Even for those who insist that 1830s–1850s minstrelsy was usually also about class, about gender, about manifest destiny, and about the politics of slavery, this focus on the war is just too much—or rather too little?—to square with either the newer sense of the genre’s multiple meanings or with its lasting, if not original, sin of racism. It has been easier to banish a song written, performed, and possibly printed in 1814 to “after the War of 1812”: a postwar period quickly turned “antebellum” and imagined to have little to do with the War of 1812. As a result, a question that might seem obvious has remained unasked: Why was the first popular blackface song—the first tune sung in black dialect in blackface about specifically American characters and events, then reproduced in print, then later remembered as the first of its kind—about a northern front victory in 1814?²
