

# 1 THE CAKEWALK, AMERICA'S FIRST NATIONAL DANCE

In the winter of 1884, a group of Philadelphians panicked: America had no national dance, and they needed one. They were planning a fundraiser for the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, to culminate in a March of the Nations, featuring a French minuet, a Dutch chain dance, girls in Spanish mantillas clacking castanets, and ladies in sensuous Gypsy dresses rattling tambourines. But when it came to performing their own traditional dance, these do-gooders were stumped. America was just over a hundred years old, and everyone who lived there—save for Native Americans, whose traditions the government was busily snuffing out—had come from somewhere else.<sup>1</sup>

One anonymous wag, responding to the Philadelphia dilemma for the *New York Times*, suggested turning to a value at the core of the nation's identity: financial greed. The male dancer could play a plumber, the female a housekeeper driven mad by his large bill. She would die of agony, and he'd sell her corpse to a medical school for extra cash. The writer didn't go into much detail about how to translate this scenario into dance steps, but he did offer an alternative: a male shop clerk would sell a female