

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Birthplace of “Dixie”

“Dixie” (a name referring to the South) and “Dixieland Jazz” (one of the earliest styles of Jazz music created in New Orleans) are terms that are not considered appropriate today in many circles. Some would prefer the use of expressions like “Classic Jazz” or “Traditional Jazz”. The word “Dixieland” became widely used in 1917 after the hit recording of the Original Dixieland Jass Band (original spelling), which consisted of five musicians who previously had played in the Papa Jack Laine bands (a racially diverse group of musicians who played for dances, parades and other events in the Crescent City).

Jazz (incubated in New Orleans) is our nation’s truly original and authentic music. With an emphasis on free expression and collaboration, it has been played joyfully and continuously since the early part of the 20th century. Louis Armstrong’s “All-Stars” were very much identified with “Dixieland”, even though Satchmo’s own influence runs through all of jazz. “Dixieland” draws its name from “Dixie”, which to many since the time of the American Civil Rights Movement has come to symbolize not the South, but the “Old South”, the Southern States that seceded from the Union to join the Confederacy.



The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (Jass became Jazz in late 1917)

When it comes to "Dixie" (from its geographic connection to the song of the same name), everything is controversial. From the etymology of the word to the song's authorship and perceived associations, there is no firm agreement. There seems to be three theories as to the origin of the word "Dixie", and the most promoted of these has its birthplace situated in New Orleans (on the corner of Iberville and Royal streets). That was the location of the Citizens' Bank of Louisiana, and the word "Dixie" refers to currency issued from this bank in ten-dollar private bank notes, labeled "Dix" (French for "ten") on the reverse side. The bank was catering to a culturally diverse New Orleans with bilingual currency. The notes were known as "Dixies" by English-speaking southerners, and the area in and around New Orleans came to be known as "the land of the Dix", or "Dixieland".

Eventually, usage of the term broadened to refer to most of the South itself. These notes are now highly sought-after by collectors. One can see the plaque for the Iberville-Royal site of the Citizens' Bank of Louisiana affixed to the wall, right behind the "Lucky Dog" cart.



The Birthplace of "Dixie", right behind the "Lucky Dog" cart

Look more closely and one can read what the plaque states about the Birthplace of "Dixie":

The Birthplace of "DIXIE"

On this site from 1835 to 1924 stood the Citizens State Bank, originator of the "Dixie." In its early days, the bank issued its own \$10 bank note, with the French word "Dix" for "ten" printed on the note's face. As this currency became widespread, people referred to its place of origin as "the land of the Dix," which was eventually shortened to "Dixieland."

Through song and legend, the word became synonymous with America's Southland.



This is but one of the three origin explanations. The other two go like this:

Another theory is that the word "Dixie" is derived from Mr. Jeremiah "Dixon" of the surveying team of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, who determined the boundaries (the Mason-Dixon Line) among four states, forming part of the borders of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and West Virginia (then a part of Virginia). The South was,

of course, below the Mason-Dixon line.

Even more outlandish is the explanation propagated by Robert Ripley of "Ripley's Believe It or Not" that the actual "Dixie's Land" wasn't even in the South but was an Idyllic farm on Long Island, New York, owned by a man named John Dixie. It was there that he befriended many slaves before the Civil War, such that it became a sort of a paradise to them. A variation to this tale was that Dixie was a Manhattan farmer who had sent either his or other's slaves south just before the banning of slavery in New York in 1827.

After placing the name with the geography, it was a Northern man (not a Southerner) who was sought out to write the famous song. It was late one Saturday in 1859, and Daniel Decatur Emmett (a member of Bryant's Minstrels in New York) had a visitor. Jerry Bryant, senior member of the troupe, approached Emmett and asked: "Dan, can't you get us up a walkaround? I want something new and lively for Monday night." Back then all minstrel shows used to finish up with a "walkaround" (also known as a "hooray"), and Emmett (a performer with musical and circus experience) was the composer of all the troupe's "walkarounds".

Emmett got down to business, but nothing presented itself right away. An article in the March 19, 1893, *Richmond Dispatch* related what happened next: "At last he hit upon the first two bars, and any composer can tell how good a start that is in the manufacture of a tune. By Sunday afternoon he had the words, commencing: 'I wish I was in Dixie.' This colloquial expression was not, as most people suppose, a Southern phrase, but first appeared among the circus people of the North. In early fall, when nipping frosts would overtake the tented wanderers, the boys would think of the genial warmth of that section for which they were heading, and the common expression would be, 'Well, I wish I was down in Dixie.'"

Bryant's Minstrels first performed "Dixie" at Mechanics' Hall in New York City on April 4, 1859, 472 Broadway, above Grand Street. A hit in New York, it became popular across the country within a year.

MECHANICS' HALL

472

BROADWAY, ABOVE GRAND STREET.

OPEN EVERY NIGHT

FRONT SEATS INVARIABLY RESERVED FOR LADIES

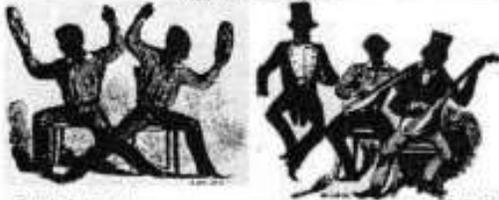
BRYANT'S MINSTRELS

Bryant Brothers Proprietors and Managers

MONDAY EVENING, APRIL 4th, 1859
PROGRAMME—PART FIRST.

Instrumental Overture..... Bryant's Minstrels
We're the boys for pinoches..... Company
We and Him..... Jerry Bryant
Boney Man..... T. B. Frensdorgat
Yes, it's a Mine..... J. Unsworth
Medley Chorus, popular European air..... Company
Only 15 Years Old..... Dan Bryant
Finale—Marche des Walts..... Fall Band

PART SECOND. VARIETIES



Pat Sent, Solitaire..... R. Leslie
FAIRIE MAC FAIRIE..... M. O. DEL PARROLLS
Vivian Solo..... F. R. Isaac
Tambourine Duet..... Jerry and Dan Bryant
Favorite Ballad..... Little Arthur
WE COME FROM THE HILLS
Barnett, Frensdorgat, Jerry and Dan Bryant.

Flute Solo..... Nell Bryant
BURLESQUE ITALIAN OPERA

Mrs. Fido's Song, Solo..... Helen Van Argo Frensdorgat
Duet by Tom MacJobby, Peter Han..... Mrs. Van Argo Frensdorgat
Duet by Fido and Mabel..... My Uncle Loveland
Duet by Fido and Mabel..... Miss Mrs. La Belle's Boyer
The Soldier's Chorus..... The whole under the direction of
Miss Mrs. Han

PART THIRD. PLANTATION

Local Banjo Song..... J. Unsworth
THE SURPRISE PARTY..... CARROLL, JERRY and DAN BRYANT
Wooden Shoe Dance..... R. Bards

After which Mr. Dan Bryant's new and original

PLANTATION SONG AND DANCE,
DIXIE'S LAND
Introducing the whole Troupe in the Festival Dance.

The whole to conclude with
"OUR AMERICAN COUSIN" BILL

Which has been brought from "Laura Keane's Theatre," AND WILL
BE PLACED ON THIS STAGE WITHOUT ANY ALTERATIONS.

NOTICE CHANGE OF TIME:
Dress open at quarter to three. Curtain will rise at quarter to eight o'clock.
ADMISSION..... 25 CENTS

REGARD PRINT

"Dixie" relates the tale of a freed black slave longing for the plantation of his birth, with lyrics written in an exaggerated African-American dialect, intended for comic effect. As part of Bryant's blackface minstrel show, it appeared second-to-last on the playbill (shown above), perhaps an indication of Bryant's initial uncertainty that the song could carry the show's entire finale. The walk-around in large print ("DIXIE'S LAND") was billed as the show's "plantation song and dance". The song was a smashing success, and Bryant's Minstrels soon made it their standard closing number. In an 1864 letter to the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, Dan Bryant (Jerry's brother), "the well known and clever Ethiopian minstrel", defended his "Burnt Cork

Opera" as a profession that "has given to America its only original music". The Bryant brothers' actual surname was O'Neill.

Dan Emmett (1815 – 1904), a native of Mount Vernon, Ohio, learned popular tunes from his mother and taught himself to play the fiddle. After service in the United States Army at a very young age, he joined a Cincinnati circus. He worked in the Spaulding and Rogers Circus as a drummer. It was with the circus that Emmett learned the technique of Negro impersonation and shortly thereafter, he was hired by Thomas "Daddy" Rice to sing and play the banjo. In 1842, Emmett formed his own Virginia Minstrels Troupe that debuted in New York City in 1843. Although performance in blackface was already an established mode of entertainment, Emmett's troupe is said to be the first to "black up" an entire band rather than one or two performers. Emmett also wrote such American classics "Old Dan Tucker" and "Blue-Tail Fly".

Although the authorship of "Dixie" is credited to Daniel Emmett, some believe the song was actually a tune passed on to Emmett by a pair of African-American brothers, Lew and Ben Snowden (born to parents who were slaves). The Snowden theory, however, has one major flaw. While Emmett likely did perform with the Snowden brothers when he retired to Knox County, Ohio, the boys would have been only small children at the time "Dixie" was composed. The theory could be off by a generation, and Emmett could have collaborated with Lew and Ben's parents. Most scholars, however, dismiss the Snowden claims outright.

Another writer named William Shakespeare Hays (Will S. Hays) also claimed to be "Dixie's" true author, but died before evidence could be produced. "Dixie" is the only composition Emmett ever claimed to have written in a burst of inspiration, and analysis of his many notes shows he spent countless hours on his other songs. Perhaps the fact that Emmett's story about "Dixie's" composition varied each time he told it, adds to mystery. By 1908, four years after Emmett's death, no fewer than 37 people had attempted to claim the song as their own.

What happened when the song "Dixie" made its way down to New Orleans, where the "Dix" notes first emerged? It was a sensation!

John Kendall wrote, "One of the most important playhouses in New Orleans was Placide's 'Varieties,' which stood on Gravier, between Carondelet and Baronne, near the site of the present Cotton Exchange." This first "Varieties" opened in 1849 under the management of Tom Placide, and the owners called their operation *La Variété Association* (after *La Variété* in Paris). It featured performers such as the sensational dancer Lola Montez, courtesan and mistress of King Ludwig I of Bavaria. Lola dazzled local audiences in 1853, before the theater burned the following year. It was soon rebuilt as the

Gaiety Theater, managed by Irish actor and playwright Dion Boucicault. It regained its previous name "the Varieties" but in 1870 met with the same fiery fate as the original. But not before that exciting night when "Dixie" made its debut.

Famed English-American comedian and theater manager John E. Owens had come to work for Tom Placide, and was putting together a new show. In 1861, an unfortunate duel between a juvenile actor and the drama critic of the *True Delta* resulted in the young man's death, and several actors (depressed by the event) leaving the company. Owens filled the void with Susan Denin and Mrs. John Wood (Matilda Charlotte Vining), who were phenomenally successful.

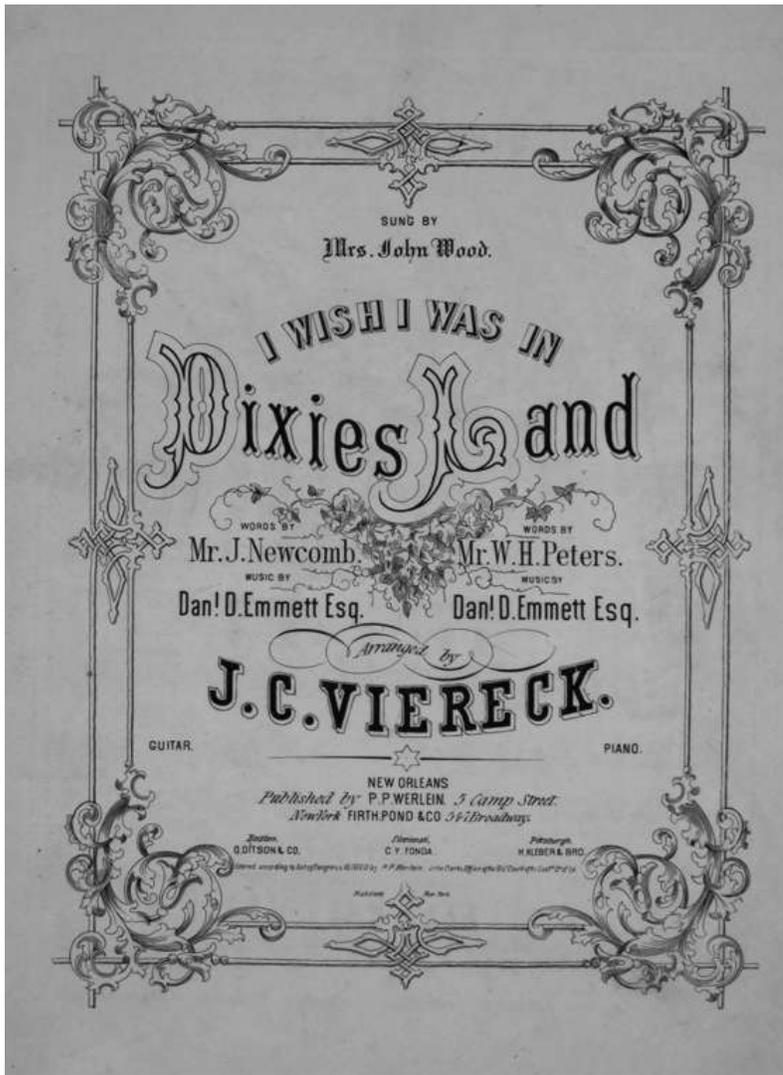
Those were turbulent times. Earlier that year on January 26, the delegates to Louisiana's secession convention meeting in Baton Rouge voted 113 to 17 to secede from the Union. Louisiana kept this independent status until March, when it transferred its allegiance to the Confederate States of America.

A burlesque called "Pocahontas, or The Gentle Savage", by John Brougham, was the attraction that April (featuring the singing talents of Mrs. Wood and Susan Denin), and in the final scene a march and drill routine of 40 women dressed as Zouaves was introduced. Carlo Patti, brother of Adalina Patti, was the leader of the orchestra. At the rehearsal, Carlo and John Owens (who was tough to please) were at a loss as to what air to incorporate. Patti suggested several pieces but none of them seemed altogether appropriate, until in despair he ran over on his violin the song "Dixie" (which he'd recently heard at a minstrel show in New York). "That suits," Owens at once replied, "it is exactly what I want." On opening night the tune created intense enthusiasm. As Kendall wrote, "It was encored seven times, and the next day it was hummed everywhere in New Orleans. The bands began to play it; the Confederate soldiers adopted it as a sort of national anthem, and thus it obtained a place in history." The *Picayune* reported, "the introduction of the 'Dixie' chorus and dance, in the last scene, is a happy thought." Not so many happy thoughts ahead, however, as the nation was headed into its deadliest war ever.



English actress Mrs. John Wood

It wasn't until June 21, 1860, through Firth, Pond & Co. in New York that Dan Emmett published "Dixie" under the title "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land". The original manuscript has been lost. Emmett's tardiness registering the song's copyright allowed other publishers, minstrel groups and performers to step in early. German-born New Orleans music publisher Philip P. Werlein took advantage of the situation and published "Dixie" in New Orleans. He credited the music to J. C. Viereck and J. Newcomb and W. H. Peters for lyrics. Werlein's version, subtitled "Sung by Mrs. John Wood", preceded that of Firth, Pond & Co.'s, but Emmett later recalled that Werlein had sent him a letter offering to buy the rights for \$5.



Werlein's version of "Dixie", published in New Orleans

The former Werlein's on Canal Street is today Dickie Brennan's Palace Café (shown below).



Emmett once claimed to have based the first part of "Dixie" on "a song of his childhood days" entitled "Come Philander Let's Be Marchin, Every One for His True Love Searchin'", but the songs are not that closely related. Another time he credited "Dixie" to an old circus song. The circus keeps popping up in these stories, which lends credence to the New Orleans "Dix" provenance (since circus performers and hands that visited the Crescent City may have used such a quirky nickname).

The jaunty, rousing and irresistible melody that is "Dixie" was traditionally played at a slower tempo than most listeners are familiar with today. The tune was once rhythmically characterized as a "heavy, nonchalant, inelegant strut", in duple meter, which is excellent at getting the crowds marching or dancing. Had it not been for the atmosphere of wartime fervor in which "Dixie" made its debut, the

song might have faded into obscurity. Still, the refrain "In Dixie Land I'll took my stand to lib an die in Dixie", hit an emotional chord.

Abraham Lincoln heard "Dixie" in Chicago a year after its debut, where it was played and sung by Ramsey & Newcomb's Minstrels. "Dixie" became a favorite of his and was played during his campaign in 1860 and at his inauguration in 1861. In 1862, it was played at Jefferson Davis' inauguration ceremony. When a band serenaded the President in the White House at the end of the Civil War, he requested "Dixie", saying it was "one of the best tunes" he'd ever heard. "Our adversaries," remarked Lincoln, "over the way attempted to appropriate it, but I insisted yesterday that we fairly captured it ...". He then requested the band to favor him with its performance.

After the South began using the song as its anthem, Emmett had some regrets. "If I had known to what use they were going to put the song," he later proclaimed, "I will be damned if I'd ever written it."

The *New York Clipper* opined that it was "one of the most popular compositions ever produced" and that it had "been sung, whistled, and played in every quarter of the globe." By 1862, the South had become popularly known as "Dixie", although numerous elements apart from the song (mentioned above) may have influenced the nickname.

Through the years, many businesses in the South contain "Dixie" in their name as an identifier, such as the supermarket chain Winn-Dixie. The *Times-Picayune* had a rotogravure magazine insert (from 1946 to 1986) before *Parade* called the *Dixie Roto* (and later just *Dixie*), with a weekly feature called "Deep in Dixie". These titles might offend some African-Americans today, but not as much as the song (since it is deeply tied to the Antebellum days of slavery).

Still, a New Orleans pop music girl group recorded as the Dixie Cups and had unbelievable success with such songs as their 1964 million selling record, "Chapel of Love", as well as "Iko Iko" and "People Say". And to think, they were almost called Little Miss and the Muffets. And what could be more a part of New Orleans culture than "Dixie Beer"? Beginning in 2011 on the CW network, there's a series called "Hart of Dixie" about a young New York doctor Zoe Hart who accepts an offer from a stranger to work in his medical practice in fictional Bluebell, Alabama (somewhat like Fairhope). Things have really changed since Bing Crosby appeared as Dan Emmett in the 1943 Paramount musical biopic "Dixie", along with New Orleans' own Dorothy Lamour.

Protests over the song "Dixie" originated in the 60s with students of Southern universities, where the song was a staple of many marching bands. In 1967, African-American cadets at The Citadel refused to stand for "Dixie" or to sing and perform it at football games. Similar

protests have since occurred at other universities, including Tulane in New Orleans.

One attempt to put the nation's differences into context is the song "An American Trilogy", which is actually a medley of three 19th century compositions: The North's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (Glory, Glory, Hallelujah), the South's "Dixie" and a Bahamian African-American folk lullaby "All My Trials". Elvis' recording of the song (sung slowly and soulfully) was a hit in 1972, yet over 465 versions of the medley have been recorded by different artists.

A local bank note printed in French, a Northern songwriter influenced by the circus, a musical triumph in the Crescent City, a tragic conflict pitting brother against brother and a period of healing and change: they all came together "way down South" in New Orleans.

NED HÉMARD

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"The Birthplace of Dixie"
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