

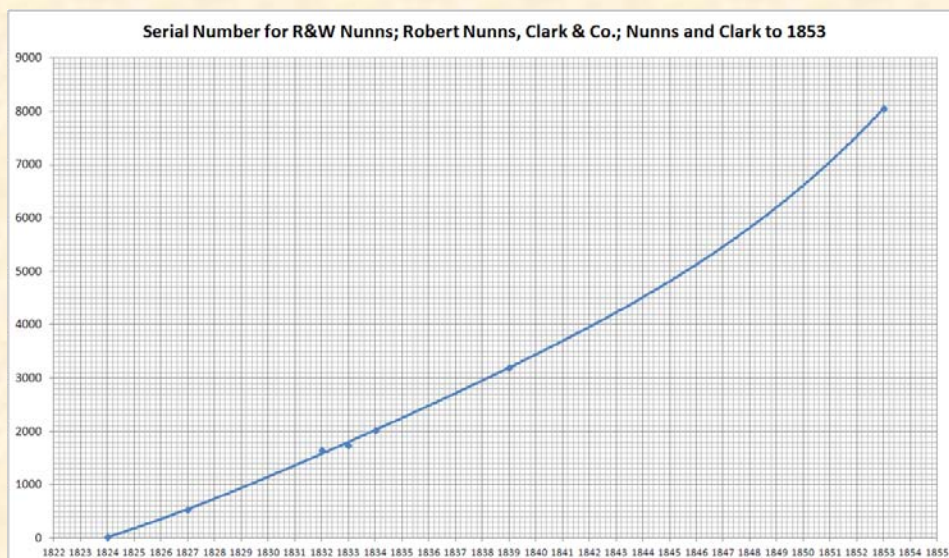
A Thoroughly 'Southern' New York Piano

Thomas Strange

A piano recently entered the collection with a complete provenance that ties it back to a place in the Southern plantation history of Fairfield County, South Carolina, numbering it among a select few early square pianos from the Deep South to have been retained in the same family, where, as it turns out, it remains today.



The piano is by the firm Robert Nunns, Clark, and Co., formerly R&W Nunns (Robert and his brother William) and was made in Setauket, Long Island NY. The serial number 2015 corresponds to a date near 1834, and family history ties it to this date rather conclusively¹.



As initially related by the family² the piano had been in the possession of Thomas Minter Lyles and Eliza Roselyn Peay Lyles as a wedding present in 1834, passing to her daughter Carrie Evelyn Lyles (who married her cousin, John Feaster Lyles), then to Carrie's daughter Edith, next to a cousin, Anna Rosalie Lyles Hicks and William Hicks of Greenville and finally to her father Thomas Austin Hicks, who owned it until his death in 2011. The Lyles and Peay families have been well researched, producing the following:

The Lisles (simplified to Lyles by 1820) family has been in North America since at least 1660, settling first in Virginia³. Ephraim Lisles received a grant of lands in South Carolina which eventually translated into property on the east side of the Broad River in present day Fairfield county South Carolina, where he brought the family and settled in 1745. The original properties were expanded and his eldest son Arromanus inherited the estates on the east side of the Broad River, with his other brothers on the west side, in what is now Newberry County. Several subdivisions of the property produced "The Oaks" and "Ivy Hall" plantations, both of which still exist (though Ivy Hall is in what amounts to a state of 'stable' ruin). The youngest son of Arromanus Lyles, Thomas, built "The Oaks" Plantation⁴ on the east Broad River property, which was his home, with his son Thomas Minter Lyles (b. 1811 - d. 1902) eventually receiving neighboring Ivy Hall, which was originally built in the 1780s, and enlarged by Thomas M. in the mid 1840s.

Thomas and his bride Eliza Peay Lyles (b. 1816 – d. 1897) settled in Ivy Hall Plantation in 1834. The Peay's, on the eastern side of Fairfield county with access to the Wateree River, were among the richest families in the South at the time, holding upwards of 9000 acres of property and over 300 African American slaves⁵. With a river access by way of the Broad River from the back yard of Ivy Hall all the way to Charleston, goods could easily move the 160 miles to and from the Plantation.



Ivy Hall, mid 20th C. (courtesy Fairfield County Museum)

In the will of Eliza's father, Austin Ford Peay, made in October of 1834, he names his new son-in-law Thomas as an executor, showing a high degree of respect for the young man, and turning to his daughter Eliza states:

“I give and confirm to my daughter Eliza Lyles and her husband Thomas Lyles the thirty negroes I have already put into their possession – having already given to my daughter a pianna worth \$300, and also to her husband Thomas Lyles the sum of \$600 cash, I further give to my said daughter the sum of \$1700 annually until the same shall amount to \$8000.”

The piano in question here is the Robert Nunns, Clark and Co. under study.

Eliza and her three sisters were educated at Single Sisters School in Salem North Carolina, later Salem Academy, a popular school for the planter's daughters⁶ in Fairfield County where public schools were precluded by the vast distances between neighbors, and at a time when schooling of any kind for girls was uncommon. Single Sisters was known to take in all races, so sending the girls there seems to present us with a family that had an “open” approach to social relations. Piano was taught along with all the usual social graces a young lady would need to succeed in the extended family circles of the polite South. Ivy Hall was a much smaller structure in 1834 than it presents today, and throughout the old part, the decoration is plain, functional and competent, but not more. Elaborate furnishings would have seemed out of place and odd at this farm house, and evidence is that everything the family owned was in keeping with this simple theme. The piano, even with its restrained decorative aspects, would have been among the more elaborate items they had.

This piano and accompanying family lore suggests that Eliza was sufficiently proficient on the piano to have asked for one as a principle wedding present at age 18, that Ivy Hall was not yet possessed of one, or it was too antiquated if it existed, and that it constituted a considerable gift in the mind of her father, despite the fact that elsewhere in the will, slaves are valued at \$300/ea. and 30 had already been given to the couple⁷. That the story of the gift would resonate in the family across generations and even surnames, such that it was remembered by a 7th generation grand niece, allows us some idea of the important place it held in the family history.



Thomas Minter Lyles, ca. 1858.

The piano later passed to Eliza's youngest daughter, Carrie Evelyn Lyles (b. Oct 12th, 1857, Fairfield Co., S. C.; d. July 2, 1949 Steedman, Lexington Co., SC. and shown here in 1858 in the arms of her nurse, age 9 months, in a hand tinted albumen print) where it remained for most of her life.



Deming and Bulkley

The piano came to Ivy Hall through the Charleston shops of Deming and Bulkley, where a label on the inside rear of the piano, much worn over the years by cleanings, accurately gives their address as 205 King Street. Additionally, Deming, or a shop foreman, has signed his last name on the wrest plank. As Deming was in New York, and the signature is different than "Taylor" who signs in the usual foreman's place on the name board, the author believes this to be in Deming's own hand.



Barzilia Deming (1781-1854) and Erastus Bulkley (1798-1872) were cousins from New York State and had partnered in NY City in 1819 after Bulkley returned from a successful furniture selling trip to Charleston with tales of immense wealth there⁸. Indeed, Charleston was at the time the richest city in America, and had a thriving market for expensive case goods. During the embargo act, and following the War of 1812, when imports from England and France were stopped, tastes had turned from Paris and London, to Philadelphia for chairs and New York for case goods and pianofortes, with the trend continuing despite the “Era of Good Feelings (1817-1825)” that developed after the war. Erastus Bulkley relocated to Charleston during the winter seasons starting in the early 1820s and grew to know the Southern planters and city customers well, such that their shop operated on the principle of knowing what the client wanted and delivering, rather than by price competition. They were the high-end manufacturers and vendors for whatever was wanted among the very wealthy in Georgia, South, and North Carolina. Unlike the competition, they did not advertise with an emphasis of low price, but rather stressed “elegance and neatness” at prices one should expect for such goods.

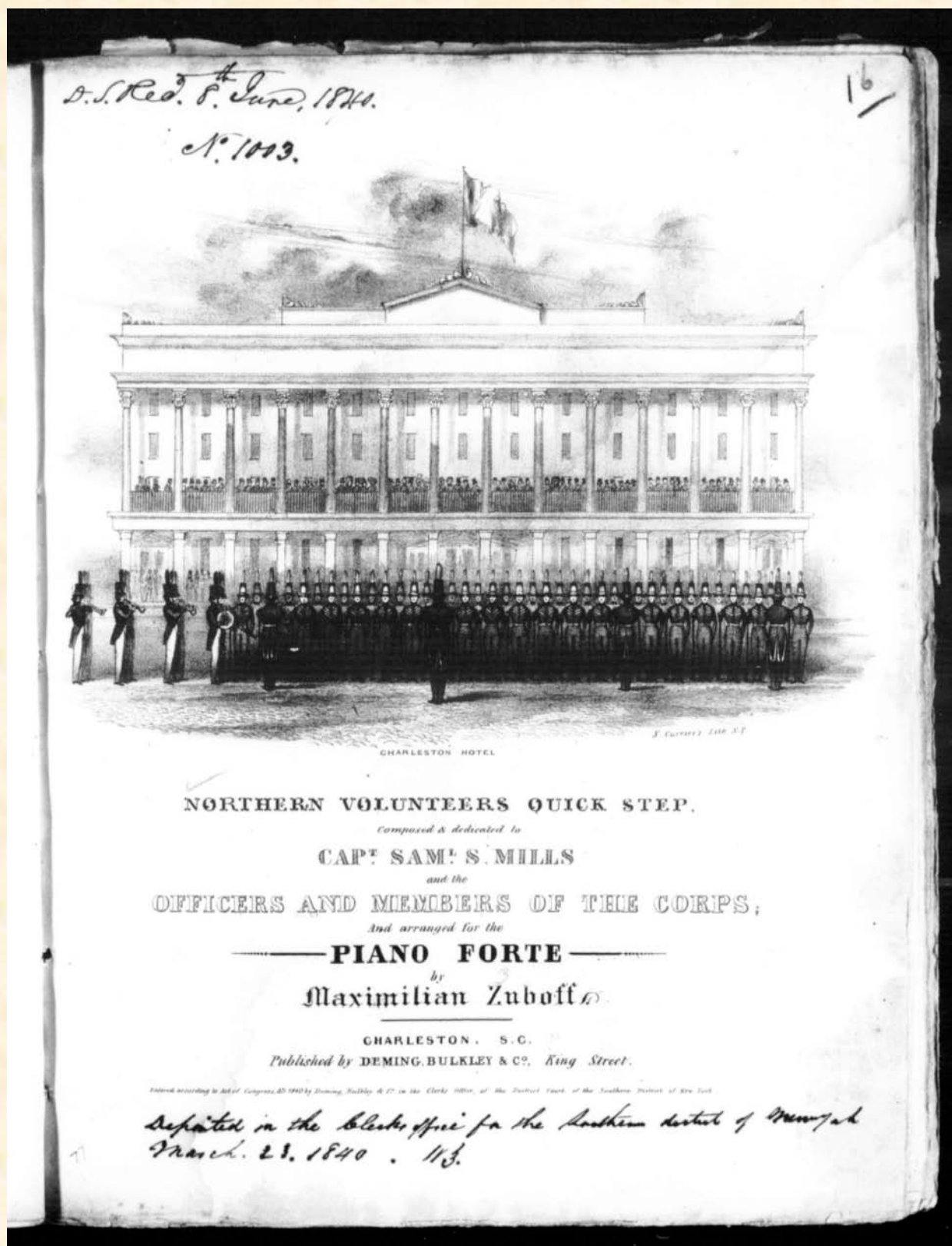


NY Evening Post, July 1820



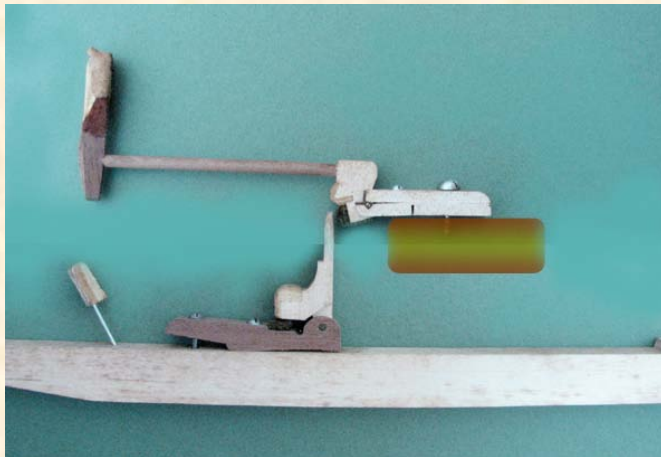
Dolphin side table by Deming and Bulkley⁹

In addition to furniture made in-house and pianofortes from the best makers, they also published and sold sheet music from the Charleston store.



Robert and William Nunns / Robert Nunns, Clark and Co.

William Nunn (b. ca. 1794 – d. ca. 1879) immigrated to America in 1821, followed the year after by his older brother Robert (b. 1791 – d. 1869). They had worked in the trade of piano manufacturing in London for some years previously, and on arriving in America, went to work for Kearsing and Sons¹⁰ before striking out on their own in late 1823. The firm was founded on a large scale, rapidly growing to a volume of over 200 pianos per year, with much of this volume accounted for by partnering with distributors such as the large music publishing house of Dubois and Stodart, Deming and Bulkley, and others. The factory was located at Setauket Long Island NY, with a main showroom, first at 3rd Ave., then at 137 Broadway. They introduced a radical change in square piano actions with the use of the Petzold-Pape grand action first described in 1811¹¹, which produces a rapid repetition with limited moving parts, and able to be made with a shallow key dip to enhance the piano response. This action was improved by Pleyel in France, and would be adopted by nearly all piano makers for much of the middle 19th C in America. They also introduced the weighted damper action rack, which operates smoothly and effectively and simplifies the system for operating a sustain pedal, while vastly improving the serviceability, and this damper system was also universally adopted for all squares.



Petzold- Pape action from an Adam Stodart square of 1851

In 1833, the firm reorganized as Robert Nunns, Clark, and Co. following the arrival of John Clark from England around 1830, the promotion of shop foreman John Pendleton, and William's sailing back to England for a limited stay. Clark would go on to marry Robert Nunns daughter. The firm continued under this name until January 8, 1839, when Pendleton left and the firm became simply Nunns and Clark.

NOTICE.—The co-partnership heretofore existing between the undersigned, under the firm of Robert Nunns, Clark & Co., having been dissolved, the business will be continued by Robert Nunns and John Clark, who will attend to the adjustment of all the affairs of said firm.

**ROBERT NUNNS,
JOHN CLARK,
JOHN PENDLETON.**

Jan 15 1839

NY Evening Post, Jan. 15, 1839.

In 1829 the firm introduced a new piano type¹².

To The Editors of the Evening Post:

Sir – We beg to call your attention, and that of the public, through the medium of your paper, to some Piano-Fortes, manufactured by us for Messrs Dubois and Stodart, which we have this morning finished and sent to their store in Broadway. These Instruments have been modeled after a patent granted in Paris, a short time back, to Messrs. Pleyel, with such alterations as the scorching nature of our climate appeared to us to be necessary to give them durability. The essential difference between these pianos and all others hitherto made consists in their having only one string to each note, in place of two or three, which have been invariably used until now.

The first idea which will naturally suggest itself by this wide departure from a system so long followed, is, that the tone of the instruments made upon this plan must be of a thinner and more wiry quality, but the fact is directly the reverse; the tone being equally firm and sound as that generally obtained from two strings. This desirable result has been produced by using very thick wire, and by making the action in a great measure upon the principle of the grand piano, by which the additional force required to bring the full tone from the thicker string has been obtained.

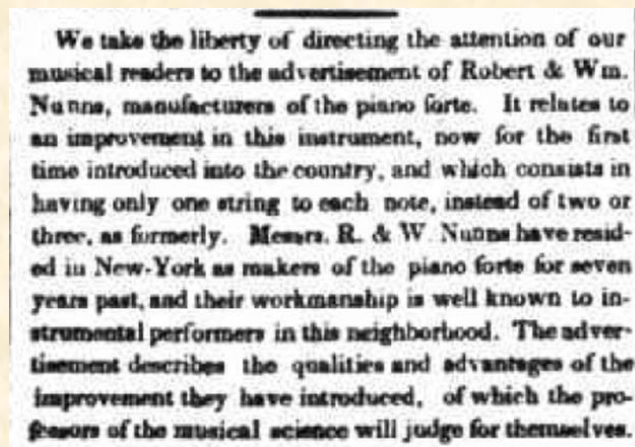
These Instruments appear to be peculiarly adapted for the more remote parts of the country, where the difficulty of having a piano kept in tune is a subject of such eternal complaint with all players except those resident near some of the large cities; and in proof of this fact, we need only appeal to the number of instruments which remain useless, from month to month, until by some lucky chance a Tuner arrives in the neighborhood – The advantages which the Unichords (as they are called) possess as regards standing in tune, must be evident even to those unacquainted with the nature of a Piano-Forte, from the circumstances of there being only one half the number of strings, while the player will immediately see their decided superiority in this all important point by the doing away with the unisons. The ear can bear with a positive note should it be a little too flat or too sharp, but the moment one of the strings of the same note differs from the other, or to speak technically, the instant they are not in unison, the instrument is useless until tuned. In fact it is to get the unisons perfect that the practiced ear of a good tuner is required: while any one, with an ear tolerably correct, can bring a note of one string so near the pitch, as to have but a very trifling difference.

The strings are also much less liable to break than those in ordinary use, from the circumstance of the wire being several sizes larger than that in ordinary use, and of such a quality that it will bear drawing up several notes higher than the pitch at which it is required to stand.

We have thus stated what we conceive to be the great advantage of these instruments for particular locations, and we can confidently assert, that they will be found equal in workmanship and finish to any pianos we have made, and which we may gratefully add have been so favorably received by the public.

Aug. 3 Robt & Wm Nunns, 3d Avenue

The Unichord idea so struck the editors of the NY Evening Post that they followed with a note within the week.



We take the liberty of directing the attention of our musical readers to the advertisement of Robert & Wm. Nunns, manufacturers of the piano forte. It relates to an improvement in this instrument, now for the first time introduced into the country, and which consists in having only one string to each note, instead of two or three, as formerly. Messrs. R. & W. Nunns have resided in New-York as makers of the piano forte for seven years past, and their workmanship is well known to instrumental performers in this neighborhood. The advertisement describes the qualities and advantages of the improvement they have introduced, of which the professors of the musical science will judge for themselves.

NY Evening Post, Aug 5th, 1829

The firm quickly gained a reputation for excellent pianos and craftsmanship, earning a premium in the 1829 and 1830 Annual Fair of the American Institute.



DEPARTMENT OF PIANOS.
1st Premium—To Rob't & Wm. Nunns, of New-York, for the best upright cabinet Piano.
2d Premium—To Wm. Geib, for the best horizontal two string Piano.
3d Premium—To Robt. & Wm. Nunns, for the best Unichord Piano, a new article.
A discretionary premium to Mr. Sackmeister for the second best Unichord Piano.

NY Spectator, Oct. 9th, 1829

ON PIANO FORTES.

First premium to William Geib, 170 Broadway, for a grand upright piano forte.

First premium to Robt. & William Nunns, 137 Broadway, for a large size horizontal piano forte.

Second premium to Charles Sackmeister, No. 145 Broadway, for a large size horizontal piano forte.

First and second premiums to Dubois & Stodart, 167 Broadway, for two small sized, square, two stringed piano fortes.

A premium to Wm. Geib, for a square two stringed piano forte.

A premium to Robt. & Wm. Nunns, for a unichord or one stringed piano forte.

The cabinet work of Geib's and Nunns' pianos was particularly noticed as being of superior workmanship.

NY Spectator, Oct. 23rd, 1830

Of interest is the note of recognition of Nunns both years for the unichord design piano. Charles P. Sackmeister was a brilliant though somewhat nomadic German who built under his own name and for others in NY, designing scalings for several firms including Nunns (1827), and active mainly in the late 1820s and 1830s. His award of second place for a unichord design in 1829, and advertisements by William Geib, Thomas Gibson, and Sackmeister throughout 1830 for unichord pianos, sometimes specifically directed for use by 'Southern Merchants and Planters', and other remote areas of the country, would indicate the concept was in vogue at this time.

PIANO FORTES.—Just received from the manufactory, two Unichord Piano Fortes, with Metallic Plates, which are offered to the public as a superior article. Connoisseurs are respectfully invited to examine these instruments.

W. GEIB,
je5 170 Broadway, opposite Courtland st.

NY Evening Post, July 1830

The reference to Camille Pleyel in Nunns' introduction of unichord pianos almost certainly refers to an article appearing in the journal "The Harmonium" of July, 1827 which Nunns would have had ready access to:

"M. Pleyel has just introduced a very happy amelioration in the construction both of square and elliptical pianos. These improvements are of various kinds. Convinced of the almost

insurmountable difficulty of bringing to a perfect accordance several strings in unison, M. Pleyel has made a trial of reducing the square piano to a single string for each note, and his efforts have been crowned with success. By an excellent arrangement of different parts of the instrument, and by the enlarged diameter of the strings, M. Pleyel has succeeded in giving to his *unichord* pianos a power of sound equal to that of good pianos with two strings, and a purity of intonation often sought for in vain in the latter. These single-stringed pianos would doubtless be too weak for the concert-room, but in the drawing-room they are everything that could be wished”¹³.

Frederic Chopin, writing to Titus Woyciechowski of a concert, remarked:

“I will furthermore give, with Kalkbrenner, a March followed by a *Polonaise* for two pianos accompanied by four other pianos. It is something crazy. Kalkbrenner will play on an immense *pantaloen* (grand piano). I will have a small monochord piano whose tone nonetheless carries like the bells on a giraffe (gireffen-flugel?). As for the other instruments, they are large and will make up an orchestra. They will be played by Hiller, Osborne, Stamati, and Sowinski” (December 12th, 1831)¹⁴.

Nunns continued to advertise unichord pianos through 1836, as did other makers until at least 1843, so the design was fairly long lived, though only occasionally encountered in surviving instruments today. R. Nunns, Clark & Co., square piano, SN 2347, last seen in the Denver Colorado area, was also a unichord.

Nunns and Clark expanded their business to the South with showrooms and warerooms in Baltimore and New Orleans, as well as the Charleston showroom of Deming and Bulkley. This approach to the business would remain very profitable for several decades but dependence on the Southern market ultimately proved fatal to the company following secession of the Southern States and the ensuing war.

Nunns & Clark's Piano Fortes,
WAREROOMS,
No. 10 N. Charles st. & 80 Fayette st.
(Entrance from either Street.)
BALTIMORE.



NUNN'S & CLARK'S PIANOS are so well known throughout the country for the past 35 years, that it is almost needless to say anything in their praise: nevertheless, the improvements made in these PIANOS in the past two years have placed them, in every point of excellence, in advance of any others, and the fact is being daily corroborated by all disinterested persons.

The tone is full, deep, pure, and exquisitely sweet and mellow; the hammers being thickly coated, this beauty of tone will be permanent. By use the Instrument will improve, the tone becoming gradually more brilliant, without getting that thin, wiry, noisy tone, so disagreeable to a refined ear. The touch is exceedingly prompt and delicate; no labor or thumping is required to produce the tone, so that the most difficult passages can be executed with neatness and delicacy. As an accompaniment in singing, the quality of the tone is beautifully adapted to mingle with the voice, not being harsh and disagreeable to the ear.

Having had many years experience in selling Pianos from the most celebrated makers, the Subscriber is confident that by the late improvements made in these Instruments, they are the best and most perfect PIANOS now made.

Persons ordering by letter, may rely upon obtaining as fine and perfect an Instrument as if personally present.

SECOND HAND PIANOS FOR SALE. PIANOS EXCHANGED, TUNED, HIRED and REPAIRED.

MELODEONS
 AND
ORGAN HARMONIUMS,
 With Stops, for Churches and the Parlor.

From the many who have purchased NUNN'S & CLARK'S PIANOS, the following persons may be referred to:

J. N. BONAFANT,	EDWARD J. FLOWEN,	MRS. ANN E. A. MOKE,
H. R. SPALDING,	St. Mary's Ch.	Dr. RICHARD McSWERRY,
W. C. JENKINS,	Col. JOHN D. BOWLING,	Col. M. HANFINGER,
W. C. JENKINS,	Treasury's Post,	R. H. MITCHELL,

Robert Nunns, Clark & Co. Piano, 1834:

The Lyles' piano has the unichord design already discussed at length; where the highest treble notes are at a string gauge of 0.92 mm, nearly double that of a conventional bichord square of the time.



The action is the modified Petzold-Pape action developed for European grand pianos in 1811, and referred to in the advertisements as the patent grand action for squares, or more regularly, the 'French' action. The piano case features the rounded front corner design then popular, which would disappear during the gothic furniture period of the 1840s and 50s, returning in the 1860s to stay. It has the iron string plate, first introduced in England by Broadwood and Sons in 1822, marbled with a faux marble paint finish, and a soundboard stretching across the top of the keys which dramatically improves bass frequency response and overall volume.



The name board is veneered in rosewood, with elaborate inlay of satinwood let into the rosewood veneer, with the name printed on the wood and sealed. The use of rosewood for the name board was common, with cheaper pianos making use of a varnish transfer decal that simulated rosewood over lesser woods, and with most American pianos making use of elaborate gold printings. The inlay work

here, while restrained in design, is both involved and expensive, and speaks to the level of quality found throughout the piano. The entire instrument presents as a premium example of the piano manufacturing craft. The use of contrasting woods at dovetail joints is found in the action, where it cannot be seen except during servicing. The fit of the cover panels is precise, with tolerances to at least 1/64 inch throughout the construction. The veneer chosen for the case is crotch mahogany, without any splits or mends, and approximately 2 mm thick.



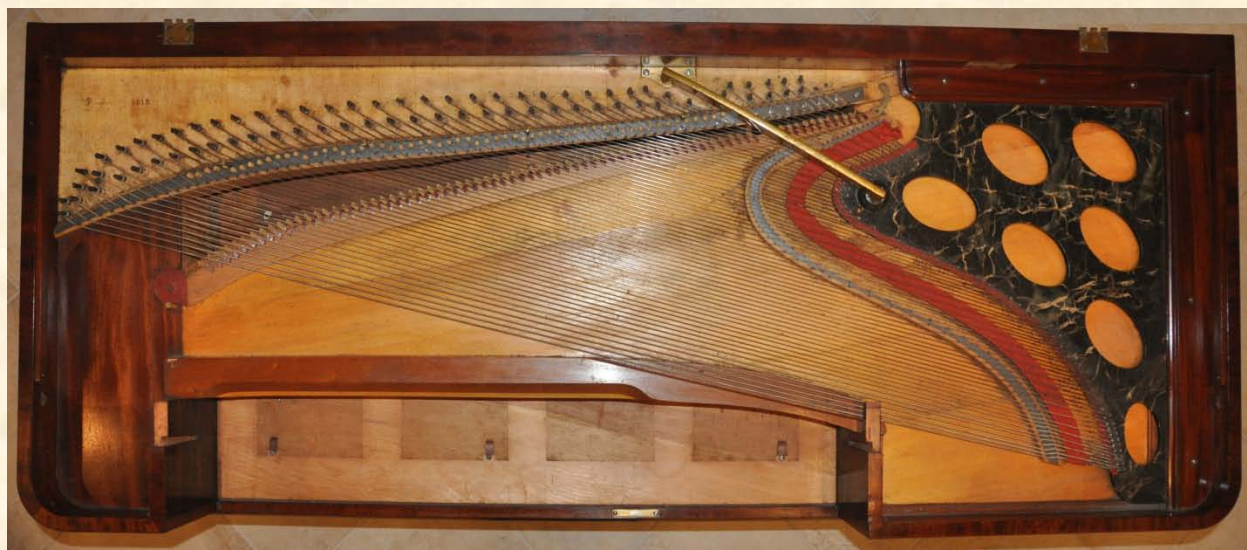
Action frame showing dovetailing

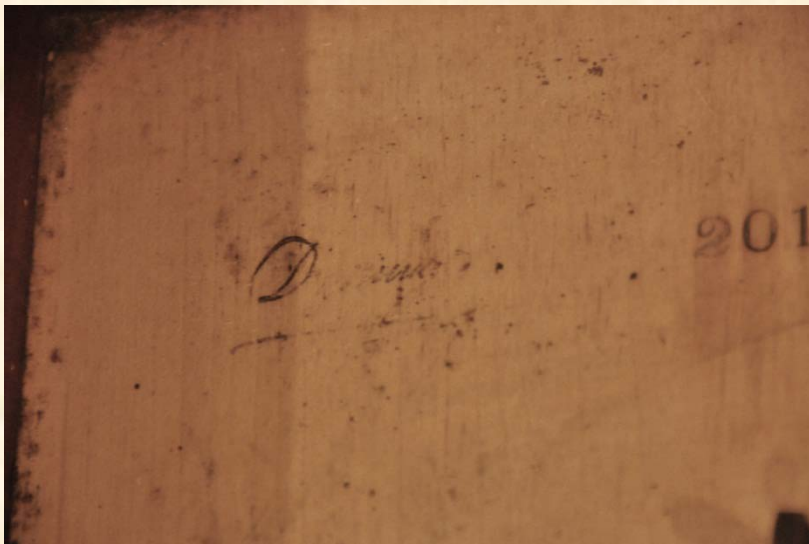


¾ view

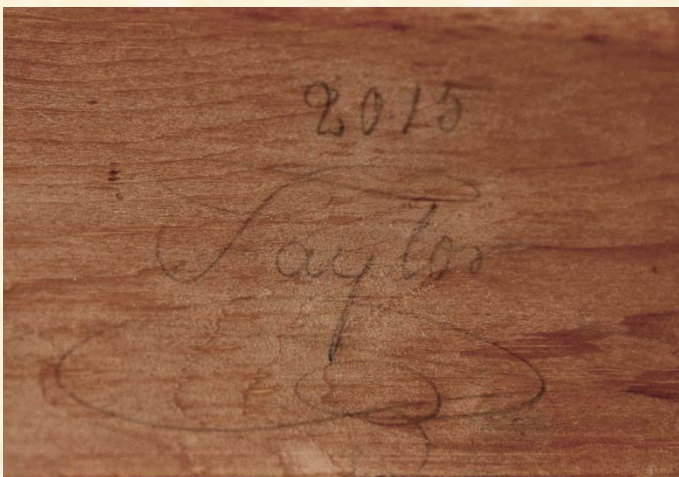


String plate w/ unichord stringing. Given the tension required for these strings, a metal hitch pin plate is necessary to prevent the pin being ripped from its seat.





Deming's signature on Wrest plank



Taylor, in pencil, on back of nameboard.

Condition:

The piano was not found to be in need of a contemporary restoration, beside a few obvious elements that could be returned to order without disturbing the instrument. The instrument had been cleaned, but not overly aggressively, at some distant point, perhaps when it entered the Thomas Hicks family. No disassembly was attempted or required beyond the normally serviceable key frame and damper rack.

The interior of the piano is in original finish, which is in overall very good to excellent condition. The exterior finish has probably been altered, but presents well enough and is left as found, with the exception of a light wax coat reapplied. Some minor veneer loss at the name board cheek wall was repaired in dark brown epoxy, and is left as found. The legs are in extraordinary unblemished condition.

The soundboard is free of cracks (!) and the ribs are firmly attached. No depression in the soundboard is notable. The case is tight and no sign of structural failure can be seen anywhere.

The pedal box is secured with modern screws, one stripped, and this was replaced with a correctly sized screw. The diagonal wood brace for the pedal box was missing and was replaced with a tropical wood that closely matched the overall color of the instrument. Old screw holes for the original were matched and reused for the replacement.

Strings, based on hitch loop fabrication and general condition, are largely original to the instrument. Several bass strings have been spliced professionally to remain in service. Three treble strings are replacements. The e4 and f4 tuning pins were shattered and must be replaced, along with their strings. 6.0 mm replacement pins were located for this task.

Hammers and shanks are in overall very good original condition. One hammer shank was mended with an older string and glue repair and left as found. Leather coverings were hardened but serviceable following exercise with a voicing tool and miniature tweezers to 'plump' the heads. Heavily grooved edges were lightly sanded to return the hammer to a reasonable response.

The knuckles of the Petzold-Pape action in the third, fourth, and scattered among the fifth and sixth octaves were lightly to moderately worn where the jack impinges on the knuckle, and the linings of these knuckles were relined in leather to return the jack point to the correct spot on the knuckle.

One ivory was detached and was reattached in hide glue and whiting mix.

The dampers were serviceable as found. The damper lift was too shallow due to wear to disengage the dampers on full pedal depression, and the leather pad for the damper pedal sticker was replaced in modern buffalo to return this functionality. The moderator pads are very thick, and produce a profound effect when engaged. These needed slight realignment to function correctly, but no material was lost.

As-found, the piano was not in a completely de-tuned state, but was at about A 390. It was able to be tuned to A 415 with three tunings and holds this well. A target of about A 435 might be more appropriate in time.

Follow Up to the Nunns Piano:

The Oaks and Ivy Hall plantation homes of the Lyles family remained intact following the war, but the Peay mansion “Melrose” or “Peay’s Palace” was burned by Sherman’s troops in Feb. 1865. The survival of both of the Lyles homes allowed this piano and the contents of the house to remain in use, as well as the 1854 Newman & Brothers of Baltimore piano purchased later for one of the daughters, which also passed through Carrie Lyles’ possession, and is now at the Fairfield County Museum.



A Mathushek Orchestral Grand piano of 1874 was at the semi-ruins of The Oaks when it was purchased to be restored, and may have come to the house at an early point, though new pianos in South Carolina just after the Civil War were a rare commodity. Family history places the piano as being bought contemporary with its manufacturing date.



The R. Nunns and the Newman & Bros. pianos are certainly in playable condition and were given the best care that the economic times allowed. With the war and its aftermath, the plantation lifestyle was radically altered, as the South was “kicked to pieces” and left to its own designs to survive. Expensive items such as pianos were at a premium; new pianos in the South during the decades immediately after the war were most uncommon, and every item of functional value was to be mended, and ‘made do

with'. These certainly included pianos, whose value as centers of entertainment for the family continued until radio entered the home. The excellent condition that we find two of the three former Lyles pianos in today speaks to a high value placed on them, and a need to keep them safeguarded and in currency over what is now nearly 180 years of continuous service for the eldest one. Such durability was probably not at the forefront of Robert Nunns and John Clark's intentions when they made this piano, but is much appreciated today. As it turned out, another daughter of Austin Ford Peay, Sarah Peay, would marry John J. Myers, from whom the author is directly descended on his mother's side of the family. Since Austin Peay originally bought the piano (for his daughter Eliza), we can say that it has not strayed too far from the family fold even yet.

The fates of some Northern firms were tied to the fortunes of the South, including those of Robert Nunns. Nunns had continued to build pianos after John Clark left the city due to poor health in 1856 (to an emotional send-off organized by workers at the factory), but the financial picture crumbled in 1861 following the start of the war, and did not recover. Although Nunns continued some level of business past 1861, he lost his home and factory in 1867 following the collapse, causing a severe retrenchment for the family. Robert's great-granddaughter, Hazel Hoyt, in a letter to the Sunnyside Restoration dated August 18, 1950, on the topic of Nunns recalled:

"His daughter, Maria Nunns, was my mother's mother. She lived to be 83, dying in 1913 when I was 23 years old, so I remember her very well. At my sister's home on Morningside Drive, where my mother also lives...there is one of these old square pianos made by Nunns and Clark, in a beautiful rosewood case. (great) Grandfather Nunns lost a fortune and the beautiful home he had built at Setauket, Long Island, during the Civil War, as many of his patrons were wealthy Southerners, and many of the pianos cost \$1000 a piece"¹⁵

The auction notice for the property, in the New York Herald and dated August 26, 1867, lists the Nunns house and farm as **"65 acres of highly cultivated land, with modern brick dwelling 40 feet square, thirteen rooms with modern appliances, farm house, barns, stables, ice house, orchards, three wells, five cisterns, &c. \$10,000 may remain on the mortgage."**

Of the factory it is described as **"Two and one half acres of land, suitable for manufacturing purposes, namely one four story brick building 120 by 45 feet, heavy framed red slate roof, heated by steam and supplied with water....also one detached brick engine room, 45 feet square, two stories, 35 horse power engine, shafting, cistern, well, &c. W.M. Clark assignee"**.

His eldest son Robert Jr. became a contractor and builder, and piano manufacturing passed from the family. The factory was slow to sell, and remained idle until 1877 when it was bought by a pool of investors towards an enterprise to make rubber.

Robert Nunns died during the week of August 16th, 1869.¹⁶ William Nunns continued on as an itinerant piano tuner until 1879. His regular visits to Sag Harbor and attendant newspaper advertisements in "The Express" remain routine until April 10, 1879, when he inserts:

“Mr. Wm. Nunns, so well known in this country as an experienced piano tuner, will soon give his patrons notice of his usual professional visit. It is only necessary to anticipate the ordinary announcement from the fact that some unprincipled person claiming to be a piano tuner, and hoping to secure Mr. Nunns business, has put in circulation the malicious story that his health will prevent him making his customary visit to this place. Mr. N will be on hand soon, prepared to attend to his business as usual and in a satisfactory manner”.

Apparently the rumors were not as malicious as claimed, since Nunns was 85 years old by this time, and this marks the last time we hear from him. At the next periodic announcement of a Nunns visit for piano tunings in Sag Harbor during 1880, his own son, also named Robert, seems to have taken over, and is the only Nunns to appear from then on.



Robert Nunns house on Long island

Epilogue:

The South never had any real tradition of piano making below Baltimore, since manufacturing was inconvenient at best during the long summers, the economy was based on agriculture, and laws then in existence ensured that remained the case, a middle class among white workers was too small to support more than limited manufacturing of any sort, and trained slaves capable of the fine work of piano joinery were nonexistent. Craftsman scale pianos and harpsichords were produced before 1800 in Charleston, but these efforts never led to any real production volume for the reasons given above.

As Nunns was so dependent on the South that the war cost them their business, and given the long history of this piano in South Carolina where it remains today, we can say with some justification that this is among the most ‘Southern’ New York instruments extant. Musically, we can divert from strict


technical observations to note that the tunes popular in the mid 19th C. American songbook sound particularly compelling when played on this piano. Setting aside the fact that this comment is filtered through a person with deep ties to South Carolina and the South, it remains obvious to anyone with a musical background that the piano has its own unique sound, given its unichord construction and leather hammers, and that light and popular tunes might well be best suited to its particular sonic ability. That we know its history, and that this history cannot help but color our observations on hearing it and its story, are the intangibles that make research into the early pianoforte so compelling. When we hear this piano play, we are hearing a sound that has been known in the Deep South back country for nearly 200 years, and it is all the more compelling given that so much else that has passed from experience, never to be found again.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Pelham Lyles of the Fairfield Historical Museum for her many contributions to this review, genealogy, and a tour of the remains of Ivy Hall, to Dru Blair of The Oaks plantation for sharing the Mathushek grand, to Carol Hicks Rice for sharing many family stories, and to the countless contributors to the Lyles genealogy for their efforts to assemble the family tree. Special thanks to Ms. Jessa Krick, Collection Manager at Historic Hudson Valley for sharing information on their Robert Nunns, Clark & Co. piano and the letter from Hazel Hoyt. We also thank John Watson, Curator of Musical Instruments at Colonial Williamsburg, Carl Strange, and David Hackett, web host of Friends-of-Square-Pianos for reading and giving constructive commentary on this work.

¹ www.squarepianotech.com /dating pianos/Nunns

² Personal correspondence with Carol Hicks Rice of Greenville SC, July 17, 2012.

³ Ancestry document  AGeil1796

⁴ The name "The Oaks" was taken from burial records of Thomas Lyles which gave that name for his home where he is buried.

⁵ "Masters of The Big House; Elite Slaveholders of the Nineteenth Century South", William Kauffman Scarborough, Louisiana State University Press, 2006, pg. 126

⁶ "Our Fathers Fields, A Southern Story" James Everett Kibler, University of South Carolina Press, 1998, pg 185-187

⁷ Last Will and Testament of Austin Ford Peay, Oct. 10, 1834, courtesy of Pelham Lyles, Director Winnsboro Historical Museum

⁸ <http://www.chipstone.org/publications/1996AF/Leath/1996LeathIndex.html> "Beautiful Specimens, Elegant Patterns: New York Furniture for the Charleston Market, 1810–1840" Maurie D. McInnis and Robert A. Leath, 2011

Deming and Bulkley's first advertisement is in the *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, January 5, 1818. Other advertisements appeared in the *Gazette* on March 10, 1818, and in the *Charleston Courier* on June 3, 1818. Bulkley sold his first shipment at the store of Henry Loomis, identified as a "hardware merchant" in *The Directory and Stranger's Guide for the City of Charleston* (Charleston: Schenck and Turner, 1819), p. 62; *Charleston Courier*, December 28, 1818. *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, November 22, 1819. Charleston was marked by seasonal rhythms. In the winter, especially from January to March, planters lived in town, and the city was crowded and active. In the summer, many residents left for cooler climes. Although escaping the heat of Charleston's near tropical climate was part of the reason, the strongest motivation was the various fevers (yellow fever, "stanger's fever," etc.) that tended to plague the city during the summer months. Bulkley's yearly excursions to New York were consistent with this movement.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ “History of the American pianoforte: its technical development, and the trade” Daniel Spillane, D. Spillane, New York, 1890

¹¹ “The Pianoforte — its history traced to the Great Industrial Exhibition, 1851” Rosamond Harding, 1933

¹² New York Evening Post, August 3rd, 1829

¹³ “The Harmonicon, a Journal of Music” Vol 5, pg 158-159, W Clowes, London, 1827

¹⁴ “Claviercompanion.com/May-June 2010/chopin-and-pleyel”, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger

¹⁵ Letter to Sunnyside Restoration (modern Historic Hudson Valley), Hazel Hoyt, August 18, 1950, regarding a recent visit to the Washington Irving home, courtesy of Jessa Krick, Collections Manager.

¹⁶ Lockport Daily Journal, Aug. 21st, 1869-**“Robert Nunns, the oldest piano maker in this country, died last week at Setauket, L.I., at the age of 78.”**