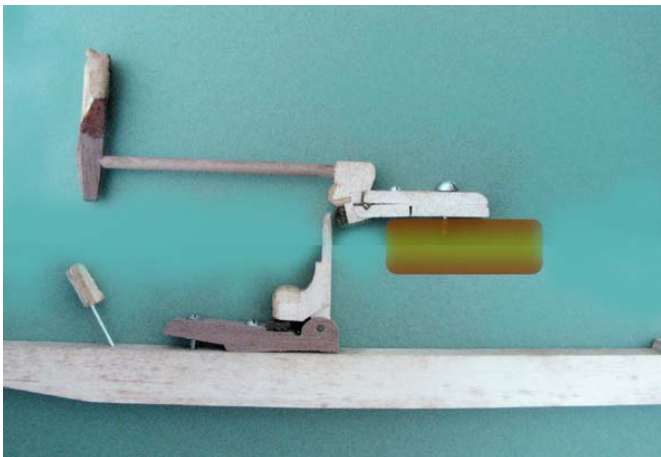


Robert and William Nunns / Robert Nunns, Clark and Co.

William Nunns (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 Sons¹ 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 1811², 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's son William would go on to marry Robert Nunns' daughter Eliza and eventually built pianos under his own name³. The firm of Robert Nunns, Clark & Co. 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 type⁴.

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.

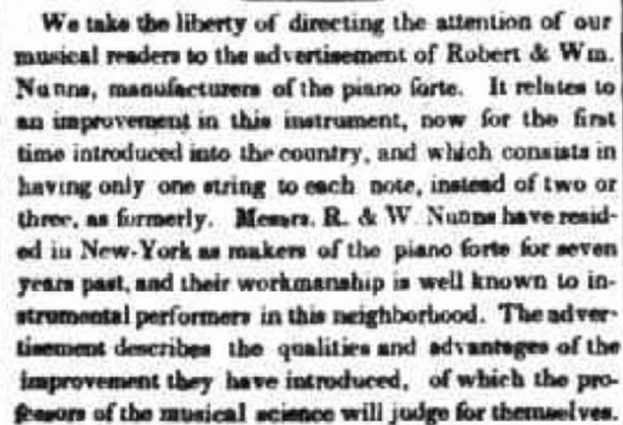
These Instruments appear to be peculiarly adapted for the more remote parts of the country, where the difficulty of having a piano kept in tune is a subject of such eternal complaint with all players except those resident near some of the large cities; and in proof of this fact, we need only appeal to 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”⁵.

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 *pantaloon* (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)⁶.

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, wery, 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 NUNNS & CLARK'S PIANOS, the following persons may be referred to:

J. N. BOWLEART,	EDMUND J. FLOWERS,	Mrs. ANN E. A. MESE,
H. R. SPALDING,	St. Mary's Ch.	Dr. RICHARD McSWERRY,
M. COURTESY JENKINS,	Col. JOHN D. BOWLING,	Col. M. BENZINGER,
AND G. FRANKFORD,	Freeman's Point,	E. H. MITCHELL.

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)⁷, 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”⁸

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, 1869.⁹ 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

Robert Nunns, Clark & Co. Piano, 1834:







¹ "History of the American pianoforte: its technical development, and the trade" Daniel Spillane, D. Spillane, New York, 1890

² "*The Pianoforte — its history traced to the Great Industrial Exhibition, 1851*" Rosamond Harding, 1933

³ Personal communication from the Great great great great Granddaughter of John Clark, M. Anita ("Nita") Gassert, II

⁴ New York Evening Post, August 3rd, 1829

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

⁶ "Claviercompanion.com/May-June 2010/chopin-and-pleyel", Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger

⁷ New York Herald, Monday, June 16, 1856

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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."