

“DIXIE”

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This popular minstrel song of the late 1850s became, because of its close association with Confederate reunions in the nineteenth century, the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy and later an emotional link with the Lost Cause. When and how the term **Dixie** came to represent the South remains obscure, as does the origin of the tune's melody itself. One thing, however, remains certain. The song "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land" had its formal debut, paradoxically, in the North, at Mechanics Hall, New York City, 4 April 1859. This song's composer was Daniel Decatur Emmett (1815-1904), who produced the song as a "walk-around," a choreographed finale for Dan Bryant's minstrel adaptation of John Brougham's popular comedy, **Pocahontas**.

A native of Knox County, Ohio, Emmett had long been associated with popular music. The founder of one of the first minstrel groups in 1842, the Virginia Minstrels of New York City, he may well have been introduced to the actual tune—as argued by Howard and Judith Sacks—by two African-American musicians, Ben and Lou Snowden, also of Knox County. The evidence remains circumstantial, as does the notion that the tune had even longer roots as a melody familiar to African-American stevedores working along the Mississippi River. Emmett later recalled that the phrase "I wish I was in Dixie" constantly came to mind when working on the finale due to his wife's complaints about Northern winters. His reflection may support one version of how the term **Dixie** itself originated: with the slaves of a Mr. Dix of Manhattan, New York, who coined the term to describe a warm, African-American paradise. The term may also have originated, of course, by allusion to Jeremiah Dixon, 1733-1779, the English surveyor who, together with Charles Mason, drew the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, the Mason-Dixon Line, traditionally regarded as the line separating the North and the South. Equally plausible is the notion that the term originated in New Orleans when the Citizens Bank and Trust Company issued in the 1850s a \$10 currency note that bore the word **dix**, the French word for "ten," hence a **dixes**.

If the original link of the term with the Crescent City remains tenuous, it is known that Brougham himself directed the first Southern production of his burlesque **Pocahontas**, or **The New Orleans Varieties**, in the fall of 1860. The stage show was extremely popular, and Bryant staged another production, in Montgomery, Alabama, later that year. According to some accounts, the first musical transcription of the tune was created in Montgomery. In any event, "I wish I was in Dixie's Land" created such a stir that it was played at Jefferson Davis's inauguration in that city, 18 February 1861. Although the song was popular in both North and South, this event alone firmly linked it with the South, which by 1861 had claimed the song for itself. As the North came to adopt "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as its own battle hymn, "Dixie," by now in various music sheet forms, had little to do with the South's fight for independence. Consequently, Confederate general Albert Pike (1809-1891), perhaps the strangest of all Southern generals, composed new verses to accompany the older thirty-two musical measures. His version was, at least, peculiar to the South:

Southrons, hear your country call!
Up, lest worse than death befall you!
To arms! ... Advance the flag of Dixie!
Hurrah! Hurrah!

For Dixie's land we take our stand,
And live or die for Dixie.

As a gesture of conciliation, Abraham Lincoln, upon being informed of General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, asked a resident military band in Washington, D.C., to strike up "Dixie." It was, and again perhaps paradoxically, one of his favorite tunes.

"Dixie" remains popular today, yet its association with the Lost Cause, together with the waving of the Confederacy's battle flag, has remained so emotive that its airing can be controversial. Just as the song's fortune remained checkered, its Northern composer, Daniel Emmett, died in reduced financial circumstances in Mount Vernon, Ohio, in 1904.

See also

"Battle Hymn of the Republic"; Music.

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