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Her People and Her History: How Camille Lucie Nickerson Inspired the Preservation of Creole
Folk Music and Culture, 1888-1982

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Shelby Loyacano

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2014

May, 2019

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Abstract

Over the twentieth century, Camille Lucie Nickerson excelled in her multi-faceted career as an educator, musician, and interpreter for the advancement of musical education for generations of black students in New Orleans and at Howard University in Washington D.C. Nickerson devoted herself to furthering her musical education through private instruction with her father, Professor William J. Nickerson. She then graduated with a diploma from Southern University and with a B.A. and M.A. in music from Oberlin College. Nickerson's leadership in musical associations on a local and national level enhanced her ability to reach audiences of all ages through her performances. She dedicated her life to musical education and the sharing Creole folk music, both personal attributes passed down from her father. While Nickerson was determined to preserve Creole folk music through her lecture-recitals, her wider purpose argued for a distinct recognition for Creole culture, thus, acknowledgment of her culture.

Keywords: folk music; Creole; B-Sharp Music Club; musical education; New Orleans; Howard University; Louisiana Lady

Introduction

“Ladies and Gentlemen: This program has been designed to bring to you – both in word-pictures and in song, -- a glimpse of historic old New Orleans, as it was – *‘dans les temps’* as the natives would say, a subject of educational value, historic significance, and musical charm. Much has been written concerning the aristocracy of this grand old city, but, tonight, the approach will be thru its FOLK CULTURE, as evidenced in its FOLK MUSIC.” – “Lecture Recital, Creole Folk Songs of Louisiana,” Camille Lucie Nickerson¹

Camille Lucie Nickerson is best remembered for her lecture-recital performances as “The Louisiana Lady,” where she shared her Creole heritage through musical performance of arrangements of Creole folk music. Nickerson felt her responsibility as a woman of Creole descent and a musical educator to ensure the preservation of Creole folk music as an important art form, and in doing so, contribute to the preservation of Creole culture. In contrast to many writers, her emphasis did not focus on the elite aristocracy, but rather on the folk culture, music, and history of the Creole working class.

Camille Nickerson used music to educate, perform, and preserve Creole culture. Nickerson, as fellow Creoles before and after her, used her dual professions as both a passionate educator and talented musical performer to share Creole history and music in order to garner recognition and respect for her people and their culture. This research examines the life of Camille Lucie Nickerson, a woman of color from Louisiana that identified as Creole, and how she utilized the professions of educator, musician, and interpreter to argue for a distinct Creole identity and culture.

¹ The title “Her People and Her History: How Camille Lucie Nickerson Inspired the Preservation of Creole Folk Music and Culture, 1888-1982” alludes to Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes’s classic Creole work, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (Our People and Our History), as Nickerson’s approach to owning and preserving Creole culture was inspired by that of Desdunes and his peers. Camille Lucie Nickerson, “Lecture Recital, Creole Folk Songs of Louisiana,” undated, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-4, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as CNP).

As a member of a musical family from New Orleans, Nickerson embraced her Creole heritage and dedicated her life to serving her Creole community as a musician and an educator. Her advantages in having a stellar education in music provided her with opportunities to reach wider audiences with her musical talent and skill. While the establishment of the B-Sharp Music Club in New Orleans and the Junior Department of Music of Howard University's School of Music are some of Nickerson's practical contributions to the education of aspiring young African American musicians, her work in preserving the distinct Creole folk music went beyond the classroom to garner a wider recognition of an independent Creole culture.

Throughout this study, the term *Creole*, unless otherwise specified, will use the definition given by Nickerson to mean the Creoles of color.² In 1932, Nickerson's master's thesis traced the chronology of the many intrusive populations who settled in Louisiana, emphasizing the inclusion of not only French and Spanish settlers, but those of African descent, as well as the indigenous peoples of Louisiana. Nickerson pointed out what she saw as a distinct racial tension between self-identified white Creoles of European, usually French, descent, and the Creoles of color with African and European ancestry. The Catholic, French-speaking Creoles of color, or Afro-Creoles, are the group Nickerson deemed responsible for creating what becomes identified as Creole folk music. In reference to the study of Creole folk music and Nickerson's heritage, this study will use the word *Creole* to reference the Creoles of color, unless otherwise specified.

Historiography

In her 1932 master's thesis, Nickerson argued that contemporary research had just begun to scratch the surface of an accurate portrayal of Creole history. Through her study, Nickerson

² The author has chosen to use "Creoles of color" and "people of color from Louisiana who identify as Creole" when referencing the collective people that Nickerson referred to as Creole in her studies. Throughout her master's thesis, Nickerson also used the following terms to describe this group of people: Afro-Creole Negro, Afro-Creoles, Creole Negroes, Colored Creoles.

stated that she aimed to share a deeper narrative of the people of color from Louisiana who identified as Creole. Her thesis and her performance career focused on bringing Creole culture to a higher level of recognition and making it more widely appreciated. Since 1932, more research has been published that depicts a history of the people from Louisiana who identify as Creole. Most works have concentrated on specific themes such as politics, music, and ethnicity. This paper will use the life of a self-identified Creole of color to touch on many of these themes.

One of the most influential historians on people of color who identified as Creole is Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Her extensive and groundbreaking work, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture During the Eighteenth-Century*, drew from obscure French and Spanish colonial records to piece together the history of slavery in Louisiana and the distinct Afro-Creole culture that she argued emerged from that environment. In *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, she points out the distinct development of a Franco-African culture in Louisiana. An important key that Midlo Hall referenced toward the historiography of African-American culture argued:

If recent scholarship has been slow to appreciate the importance of the early colonial period for the development of varying patterns of Afro-American culture in different regions of Anglophone United States, the problem has been compounded for the very distinctive slave culture that developed in Louisiana during the eighteenth century.³

Midlo Hall also argued that by the time of the United States' purchase of the Louisiana Territory, a distinct Afro-Creole culture with its own language and musical, historical, folkloric, and religious traditions had already been firmly established. Midlo Hall points out the often overlooked story of Afro-Creole slaves within the larger history of people of color in south

³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logdson (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 59.

Louisiana, and points to Afro-Creoles as a distinct culture of which an understanding is necessary in order to establish a holistic history of the Creole people of color in Louisiana.⁴

In her work *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, Virginia Domínguez explores the many and varied terms of identity used by ethnic groups in Louisiana, while specifically focusing on people of color who identify as Creole. Domínguez emphasizes on the connotations of identification terms and associations to reveal the complexity of ethnicity in southern Louisiana. For example, she examines “the conception of purity” as utilized by both who she termed the white and colored Creoles, to compare the widely accepted understanding of purity as equating to superiority, thus, any mixture of blood being conveyed as inferiority.⁵ She then provides a detailed explanation of the historical connotations of African or European ancestry and their social and economic effects on both people of European origin and people of color who identify as Creole. The results of such analysis reveal the underlying root of racial inequity that she argues fuels most of the tensions surrounding the many definitions of the term *Creole*. Domínguez emphasized the importance of understanding the historical struggle over the criteria of social structures, yet overall reluctance of many to acknowledge that social classification is a man-made construction.

Most recently, Sybil Kein, in her *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*, attempts a holistic Creole history that defines and celebrates an identity that Kein argues has been neglected too long. Composed of fifteen essays, Kein’s anthology brings

⁴ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture During the Eighteenth-Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

⁵ Virginia Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 153.

together a diverse group of authors intimately connected to their subjects to explore Creole culture, literature, art, food, music, professions and social barriers.⁶

On the subject of political history of people of color from Louisiana who identified as Creole, historians Caryn Cossé Bell and Rebecca Scott produced trailblazing research. In *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Bell and Joseph Logsdon address the aftermath of Reconstruction and its impact on the communities of color in New Orleans. Logsdon and Bell reinforce the complexities of the clash of the American two-tiered racial structure with the three-tiered structure in New Orleans. In describing the tensions across the color lines in late nineteenth century New Orleans, Logsdon and Bell reveal the loss of Creole identity and the growing unity of all non-whites across the city in response to “the ability of self-interested parties to exploit and exacerbate their persistent divisions,” resulting in a “white-black ‘American’ alliance that eclipsed Creole eminence and weakened the resistance to a policy of racial separation.”⁷

In Bell’s *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868*, she provides support to her argument that Afro-Creoles were not, as often portrayed, reactionary, color-conscious elites, detached and hostile toward slaves, who supported the Americanization of New Orleans. She developed the political character of Afro-Creoles through their culture, but also points to influences like French political thought and the resulting revolutions of the nineteenth century, the fluidity among racial boundaries before the Civil War,

⁶ Sybil Kein, *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

⁷ Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900,” ed. Arnold Hirsh and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

and the demographic shift resulting from waves of immigrants arriving in New Orleans and their own Americanization process.⁸

Rebecca Scott is most well known for her work in the comparative histories of slave emancipation in the Americas, but her microhistory, “Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary (2007),” further revealed the intricacies of Atlantic and Caribbean networks of culture, trade, and politics through a balance of micro and macro environments. Using primary resources and Sidney Mintz’s *Worker in the Cane* and *Sweetness and Power*, she follows generations of one family through their travels from Europe, to the Caribbean, and then to New Orleans, to reveal a detailed account of the political experience of free people of color in New Orleans and how one family’s history was shaped by such complex experiences and how they in return shaped their environments.⁹

Musical historians have studied and represented Creoles of color as a distinct culture responsible for many contributions to the music of southern Louisiana. Henry Kmen’s *Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841* offers a thorough and detailed social history of music in this city and how both popular and classical music was available to people of all classes. Kmen describes the many institutions of music, dancing, and masking in this Franco-American city across boundaries of race and ethnicity and how different ethnic groups contributed a variety of genres and variations to the musical repertoire.¹⁰

Most recent historiography in exploring Creole influence in New Orleans musical history has focused on the Creole contributions to one of the most popular, yet misrepresented genres,

⁸ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

⁹ Rebecca J. Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 2 (2007).

¹⁰ Henry A. Kmen, *Music In New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

jazz. In his article, "From Quadrille to Stomp: The Creole Origins of Jazz," Thomas Fiehrer debunks many popular myths on the origins of jazz. For instance, he argues that early jazz musicians were not lacking in formal musical training, yet the idea of early jazz as primitive, performed by untrained musicians solely in bar rooms and dance halls persists in popular and scholarly texts. A key piece of Fiehrer's argument focuses on New Orleans as an ethnically fluid musical environment where, until the early twentieth century musicians, of all colors interacted and exchanged musical ideas. Fiehrer emphasizes the pivotal contribution of Creoles to the history of jazz and music in New Orleans by stating: "Every musical genre in the Creole City interpenetrated with others, a process for which jazz is the essential metaphor... The important factor is the Creole people; otherwise it could've happened in South Carolina, Mississippi, Jamaica, or Angola... but it didn't."¹¹

American musicologist Lawrence Gushee continued the recognition of Creole contributions to early jazz in his work *Pioneers of Jazz: The Story of the Creole Band*. Gushee focused on music as the sole source of income for many musicians of all ethnicities, and how that required the development of adaptability; an ability to read sheet music, as well as pull from previous experiences and exposure in order to perform wherever they could. Gushee argues that the members of the Creole Band best fit that description: "In other words they were far from being musical primitives or amateurs..." As to how the Creole Band fits into the musical history of New Orleans, Gushee argues that the Creole Band was not only the first jazz band to make its

¹¹ Thomas Fiehrer, "From Quadrille to Stomp: The Creole Origins of Jazz," *Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (1991): 21-38.

mark outside New Orleans, but also the band's career helps answer questions about how jazz became a nationally accepted genre.¹²

Authors Maud Cuney-Hare and Henry Edward Krehbiel, in their respective works *Negro Musicians and Their Music* and *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music*, place the culture and music of the people of color from Louisiana who identified as Creole among other African-American folk music and discussed the distinctive qualities among each genre.¹³

Rodolphe L. Desdunes' pioneering *Nos Hommes et Notres Histoire* (Our People and Our History) is one of the most influential works that depict the heritage and social culture of Creoles of color in New Orleans. In his record of the lives of fifty prominent Creoles who lived in New Orleans during the nineteenth century, Desdunes emphasizes the contributions that Creole professionals of all sorts, such as poets, doctors, musicians, lawyers, and artists, brought to the cultural and political history of Louisiana. His proud claims of his heritage provides an account of history that had been vastly overlooked, while arguing for the need of black people to maintain their own identity and heritage for the future of their culture.¹⁴

The efforts started by Desdunes and the original *Les Cenelles* poets became a continuing effort by many generations of people of color in Louisiana to follow. Nearly 100 years after their predecessors, another group of people of color called themselves *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters in appreciation of what their ancestors started. In Derek Wood's article, "Art had

¹² Lawrence Gushee, *Pioneers of Jazz: The Story of the Creole Band* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹³ Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1936). Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1914).

¹⁴ Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *Our People and Our History: A Tribute to the Creole People of Color in Memory of the Great Men They Have Given Us and of the Good Works They Have Accomplished*, trans. and ed. Sister Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge, 1973; original ed. in French, 1911).

almost left them:” Les Cenelles Society of Arts and Letters, The Dillard Project, and the Legacy of Afro-Creole Arts in New Orleans,” he explores a thorough analysis of the original *Les Cenelles* with their counterparts in the 1940s. A key aspect of his research compares the mission of each group of scholars and how they used their craft to not only make their culture relevant, but to draw increasing political voice and purpose from their cultural contributions to society. The second *Les Cenelles* used the views of their ancestors to assert their right to claim European heritage and to see themselves as equal to other white contemporary artists. Though not known on a widespread scale due to their disbandment and final exhibition presented in 1942, Wood argued that the *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters contributed to the history and art of African Americans in Louisiana and the United States as a whole.¹⁵

The Nickerson family has been mentioned in research that focuses on people from Louisiana who identify as Creole and specifically, musical educators from New Orleans. In his article “From Quadrille to Stomp: The Creole Origins of Jazz,” Thomas Fiehrer references the many Creoles who performed at the French Opera House and the scores of other conservatory-trained performers, including Professor William Joseph Nickerson’s own student, Ferdinand Lamothe, who was also known as Jelly Roll Morton.

In *Pioneers of Jazz: The Story of the Creole Band*, Gushee entwines Camille Nickerson’s family in his larger narrative of influential musicians and educators of color in New Orleans, referencing Professor W. J. Nickerson as one of the best known music teachers among the handful of African-American musicians in New Orleans with a reputation for teaching. Gushee also recognizes the popularity of Nickerson’s Students’ Orchestra, and also mentioned two of Nickerson’s children, Camille, pianist, and her older brother, Henry, violinist.

¹⁵ Derek R. Wood, “‘Art had almost left them’: *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters, the Dillard Project, and the Legacy of Afro-Creole Arts in New Orleans,” *Southern Quarterly*, 55 no. 1 (Fall 2017): 55-71.

In his book *Beacon Lights of the Race*, in which Green Polonius Hamilton reflects on Desdunes's idea to preserve and appreciate the culture of people of color, Professor William Joseph Nickerson is mentioned in depth. Hamilton, the principal of Kortrecht High School, a school for black students in Memphis, published his collection of the contributions of important people of color in the South as a source of inspiration for African-American youth. Hamilton not only mentioned Professor William J. Nickerson, but also provided thorough accounts of Nickerson's childhood, professional career, family life, and the loss of his second wife. While there are no citations or sources, most of the material presented can be verified in other documents.¹⁶

Since 2000, several publications have begun to acknowledge the role of music education in the study of New Orleans. Music historian of the New Orleans Public Schools Al Kennedy drew on his experience with the Orleans Parish School Board to write *Chord Changes on the Chalkboard: How Public School Teachers Shaped Jazz and the Music of New Orleans*. Kennedy's book was the first to document ways in which New Orleans public school teachers acted as mentors to shape the future of jazz and the music of New Orleans. In his opening chapter, Kennedy praised the Nickerson family, Professor William Joseph, his wife, Julia Ellen Lewis, and his daughter, Camille, for their pedagogical contributions that enabled jazz instruction to succeed within public schools. Although the Nickersons were not what most historians would call jazz musicians, Kennedy connected their pedagogical influences to what developed in the musical education of New Orleans in the decades that followed.¹⁷

¹⁶ Green Polonius Hamilton, *Beacon Lights of the Race, Vol. 4, Issue 114* (Memphis: E.H. Clarke and Brother, 1911), 51, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=MysEAAAAYAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA10>.

¹⁷ Al Kennedy, *Chord Changes on the Chalkboard: How Public School Teachers Shaped Jazz and the Music of New Orleans* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2002). Additional master's theses and dissertations that reflect the importance of musical pedagogy in the early twentieth century before the popularization of jazz through the present day include the following resources: Sherri Tucker, "A Feminist

In the early 1990s, a few key articles were written recognizing Camille Nickerson's contributions to Creole folk music and musical education. Sandra G. Shannon, Professor Emeritus of African American Literature at Howard University, authored "Camille Lucie Nickerson Remembered: The Role of the 'Louisiana Lady' in Preserving Louisiana's Afro-Creole Folk Music (1990)," the first publication to utilize the Camille Nickerson Papers at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center. Using Nickerson's thesis and performances, Shannon analyzed Nickerson's cultural preservation strategy in relation to her musical environment.¹⁸

In her biographical article "Camille Lucie Nickerson: 'The Louisiana Lady,'" Anne Key Simpson correctly identifies Aurelia Duconge as being Camille Nickerson's mother and Julia Ellen Lewis as Professor Nickerson's second wife. Simpson's article places Nickerson's performance career within the brief context of her musical education, family life, and extra-curricular activities that enabled her success on the stage, rather than solely focusing on her contributions to the preservation of Creole folk music alone. In addition to the Camille Nickerson Papers at Howard University, Simpson used additional collections from the Oberlin Archives, Amistad Research Center, the University of Arkansas Archives, and Nickerson's interview with former colleague, Doris E. McGinty, to conduct her research. Simpson, a former faculty member from the University of Southwestern Louisiana School of Music, wrote that her study was "in no way intended to be definitive," and this research further examines Nickerson's

Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen," (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 2004). William D. Buckingham, "Musical Training and Early Jazz in New Orleans, Black Institutions of Education," master's thesis, Tulane University, 2011. Michael James Torregano, Sr., "The History of Jazz Education in New Orleans: An Investigation of the Unsung Heroes of Jazz Education," PhD, diss., Doctoral of Musical Arts, Boston University, College of Fine Arts, 2014, <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/11064>.

¹⁸ Sandra G. Shannon, "Camille Lucie Nickerson Remembered: The Role of the 'Louisiana Lady' in Preserving Louisiana's Afro-Creole Folk Music," *Louisiana Literature* (Fall 1990), 69.

life as a Creole musician and educator as predecessors for her career as the interpreter and arranger known as “The Louisiana Lady.”¹⁹

In her reference publication *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Eileen Southern, a scholar in African-American musicology, thoroughly examines the chronological history of Black Americans and their musical contributions. Both Camille and her father, William Joseph Nickerson, are included in Southern’s collection of artists.²⁰

New Orleans’ historian Florence E. Borders authored two key articles that reference Camille Lucie Nickerson and Creole music. “Researching Creole and Cajun Musics in New Orleans” focuses on the “black component of Creole and Cajun music, with emphasis on the twentieth-century developments,” and how others can begin their own research in this field. She discussed the many definitions of the words Creole, Cajun, and *les noires*. Borders credited Camille Nickerson, among others, for her work collecting, arranging, and performing Creole folk songs for the public. “Centennial of Camille Nickerson” highlighted Nickerson’s contributions to the preservation of Creole folk music.²¹

Unlike previous works, this research will focus on Camille Nickerson’s strategies for sharing her Creole culture and folk music as an educator, a musician, and a performer. Viewing Camille’s ambitions through the influences of her Creole heritage, her family, her education, and

¹⁹Anne Key Simpson, “Camille Lucie Nickerson, ‘The Louisiana Lady,’” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 36, no. 4 (1995). Simpson was the first author to correctly state that Julia Ellen Lewis was not Camille’s mother, but Professor Nickerson’s wife from his second marriage. According to Simpson, Camille listed Aurelie Duconge as her mother within Oberlin records from 1912, while D. Antoinette Handy confirmed that Lewis was Nickerson’s second wife.

²⁰ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1971).

²¹ Florence E. Borders, “Researching Creole and Cajun Musics in New Orleans,” *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988): 15-32. Florence E. Borders, “Centennial of Camille Nickerson,” *The Chicory Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 23-24.

her environment becomes a much larger narrative than one that simply traces her fame and success.

“Her People...”: The Nickersons

According to Henry A. Kmen, during the first half of the eighteenth century New Orleans was “the most musical city in America.” From street cries to opera, from dance music to symphonic concerts, the city teemed with music.²² Though various Creole styles of music had been mostly overtaken by the late nineteenth century, the city of New Orleans was still overflowing with musical talent and performance. Kmen found that these performers were often musical instructors, as “nearly all the singers and instrumentalists who came over with the opera during these early decades of its existence found ample opportunity to teach.”²³ As many of their contracts for performance ended, the performers saw teaching as an opportunity to become permanent figures in the city’s musical life. This transition played a role in the larger evolution of the musical environment of New Orleans. Musical performances provided part-time employment while leading to full-time work through institutions, such as local churches or as music teachers both in the many musical instrument stores in the city and in private homes.

Throughout the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, the availability of musical instruments, instruction, and the publishing of local sheet music in New Orleans enabled many young musicians to expand their talents. For example, popular music stores, such as Werlein’s Music Store, the Junius Hart Music Company, the Blackmar firm, and Grunewald’s School of Music, contributed to the development of New Orleans’ musical heritage as their businesses

²² Henry A. Kmen, *Music In New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

²³ Kmen, 184.

served as an affordable, yet high quality center for the needs of all musicians, regardless of age, ethnicity, or talent level.²⁴

Because of these opportunities, music became the family business for many New Orleanians.²⁵ A particularly important aspect of this musical culture involved the institution of musical families. This paper will investigate one such family, and particularly the daughter of that family, Camille Nickerson. The Nickerson family's musical prominence began with Camille's father, Professor William Joseph Nickerson. Professor Nickerson's talents as a musical performer and educator provided him with a fruitful career that produced many popular New Orleans musicians, such as Jelly Roll Morton, "Sweet Emma" Barrett, and Manuel Manetta. Nickerson's first marriage to Aurelie DuConge, a native New Orleanian, produced three children, Henry, Camille, and William Joseph Nickerson Jr.²⁶ Aurelie DuConge died March 7, 1896, at the young age of thirty-three.²⁷

In 1903, Professor Nickerson then married Julia Ellen Lewis, a former member of the Nickerson's Ladies' Orchestra and prominent member of Creole society in New Orleans. Sharing in Nickerson's value of musical education and performance, Lewis dedicated herself to

²⁴ Alfred E. Lemmon, "Classical Music in Louisiana," in <https://64parishes.org> *Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, ed. by David Johnson, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 2010–, Article published January 6, 2011, <https://64parishes.org/entry/classical-music-in-louisiana>.

²⁵ Connie Zeanah Atkinson, "300 Years of New Orleans Music: The Rhythm of the City," in *New Orleans: The First 300 Years*, ed. by Errol Laborde (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 2017).

²⁶ Birth Certificate for Henry Nickerson, June 2, 1885, New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790-1899; Louisiana Vital Records; Volume: 82; Page Number: 1003; Research Library, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Death Certificate for Henry Nickerson, New Orleans, Louisiana, Death Records Index, 1804-1949, Orleans Death Indices 1908-1917; Volume: 151; Page: 547; Research Library, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. U.S., World War I Draft Registration Card for William J. Nickerson, Jr., 1917-1918, Registration State: Louisiana; Registration County: Orleans; Roll: 1684924; Draft Board: 11. Henry Nickerson was born on June 2, 1885, while William Joseph was born on January 19, 1893. According to the New Orleans Death Records and a *Times-Picayune* obituary, respectively, Henry Nickerson died on February 12, 1911 due to illness and William Joseph Nickerson died on June 13, 1919 of unknown causes.

²⁷ *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), March 8, 1896.

assisting her husband in his musical instruction at Southern University and privately in their home. Lewis died on December 17, 1908, at the age of twenty-nine following a brief illness. In 1911, Professor Nickerson entered into his third and final marriage to Artelia Winter. Their marriage produced Nickerson's youngest son, Dalton Warner.²⁸

As a musical family, the Nickersons played an important role in the lively musical environment of New Orleans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Each of Nickerson's sons received a thorough musical education. Henry, a violinist, and Dalton, a trumpeter, pursued musical careers professionally, while William Joseph Nickerson, Jr. became a clerk.²⁹ Nickerson's only daughter, a renowned pianist, most closely followed her father's footsteps. Camille embraced her father's dedication to educating young musicians and promoting community involvement throughout her life. To better understand how Camille Nickerson used her musical heritage and opportunities to establish a multifaceted career as an educator, musician, and interpreter, a closer look at her father's and stepmother's careers offer insight.

Professor William Joseph Nickerson and Julia Ellen Lewis Nickerson

Though people praised Nickerson as a violinist, composer, and arranger in New Orleans, Professor William Joseph Nickerson was best known as one of the most prominent music instructors during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century. He was born on November 10,

²⁸ Certificate of Marriage, William Joseph Nickerson to Artelia Winter, August 10, 1911, New Orleans, Louisiana, Marriage Records Index, 1831-1964, Louisiana Vital Records; Volume: 33; Page: 531; Research Library, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Birth Certificate for Dalton Nickerson, June 12, 1912, New Orleans, Louisiana, Birth Records Index, 1790-1915, Louisiana Vital Records; Volume: 33; Page: 531; Research Library, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

²⁹ Letter from Dalton Nickerson to Peter Carr, April 4, 1974, Nickerson, Dalton, persons vertical File, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University. U.S., World War I Draft Registration Card for William J. Nickerson, Jr., 1917-1918, Registration State: Louisiana; Registration County: Orleans; Roll: 1684924; Draft Board: 11. Dalton Nickerson (interviewed by William Russell, May 11, 1983), "The Historic New Orleans Collection, William Russell Collection, MSS 516, Folder 850. Although Phillip Nickerson is mentioned within other sources as being a son of Professor Nickerson, Dalton Nickerson refutes this rumor in his interview with *Digest*, saying that he was not a relative as far as he knew.

1865.³⁰ According to musicologist Eileen Southern, as a youth, Nickerson studied with Professor L'Enfant of the French Opera orchestra in New Orleans. Nickerson attended Straight University in New Orleans, a historically black college founded by the American Missionary Association. In 1883, Nickerson graduated from the Normal Department at Straight University and shortly after, became a part of the music department faculty at Southern University. Camille Nickerson recalled her father's position at Southern University "when it was more a high school than a university."³¹

According to former student, musician-teacher, and journalist Edward Belfield Spriggins, Professor Nickerson's successful recitals at Southern University were eagerly anticipated and largely attended by the general public of New Orleans.³² During the 1886-1888 seasons, Professor Nickerson took a leave of absence from Southern University to perform with the Georgia Minstrels, one of the most popular minstrel groups in the South.³³ In 1891, Professor Nickerson was appointed principal of the music department at Southern University, a position he held for nearly two decades.³⁴

At the turn of the century, Professor Nickerson led his independently operated Students' Orchestra, while holding his position as principal of Southern University's music department, and providing musical accompaniment in his local church. Between the years 1913 and 1915,

³⁰ Eileen Southern, *Biographical Dictionary Of Afro-Americans and African Musicians*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982) 288-289.

³¹ Doris E. McGinty, "The Louisiana Lady," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 1 (1979), 83.

³² Ulysses Simpson Lane, "The History of Southern University: 1879-1960" (Ed. diss., Utah State University, Logan, 1970), 85.

³³ *Weekly Pelican* (New Orleans), June 18, 1887. Arthur R. LaBrew, "Black and White Scholarship Compared," 2013 Literary Arts Fellow, Kresge Arts in Detroit, <http://www.kresgeartsindetroit.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Black-and-White-Scholarship-Compared.pdf>, 24.

³⁴ Green Polonius Hamilton, *Beacon Lights of the Race, Vol. 4, Issue 114* (Memphis: E.H. Clarke and Brother, 1911), 51, Googlebooks. LaBrew, "Black and White Scholarship Compared," 23.

Straight University catalogues reveal that Professor Nickerson returned to his alma mater as part of the faculty of the Music Department teaching orchestra as Southern University moved in 1914 to Scotlandville, just north of Baton Rouge.³⁵ From 1914 through 1916, Professor Nickerson also worked in the New Orleans public schools, teaching after-school vocal, instrumental and orchestra classes at Thomy Lafon School, where Sylvanie Francoz Williams served as principal.³⁶ Professor Nickerson also participated in several benevolent societies, such as the *Salvator Societe d'Assistance Mutuelle* and the *Société des Jeunes Amis*.³⁷

In 1895, Professor Nickerson established the Young Ladies' Orchestra, the first female orchestra in New Orleans.³⁸ Comprised of nine female members, the Young Ladies Orchestra, also called the Students' Orchestra, often included young male students.³⁹ Many of Nickerson's students came from influential Creole families in New Orleans, and his instruction enabled networks and relationships to develop among future well-known musicians. In the spring of 1899, the *Daily Picayune* covered the Students' Orchestra's participation in a Northern Tour that included dramatic, comedic, and patriotic pieces in each performance.⁴⁰

³⁵ Straight University Catalogues 1913-1933, Straight University Collection, Library Archives and Special Collections, Will. W. Alexander Library, Dillard University.

³⁶ *OPSB Minutes*, March 25, 1915, Orleans Parish School Board Collection, MSS 147, Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

³⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, February 11, 1928. Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002), 151-74.

³⁸ Hamilton, 51.

³⁹ Eileen Southern, *Biographical Diction of Afro-American and African Musicians* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 288.

⁴⁰ *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), May 2, 1899. According to the article, the members of Nickerson's Students' Orchestra included: Emma Williams, Marie Sullivan, Emma Perkins, Valena MacArthur, Louise Hardy, Florence Lewis, Maxie Pessau, Camille Nickerson, Julia Ellen Lewis, Rosa Fleming, Mrs. M. Lastrapes, Mrs. E. C. Harris, Morris Lewis, Henry Nickerson, Wendell McNeil, Paul Dominguez, Edward Bowman, Theogene V. Baquet, James A. Porter and J. M. McMurray.



THE STUDENTS' ORCHESTRA OF NEW ORLEANS.

Composed of 25 or 30 performers, a number of whom are ladies. The Orchestra goes in a body to Atlanta to take a prominent part in the Young People's Congress.

Figure 1. A photograph of Nickerson's Students' Orchestra printed in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* on July 31, 1902. *Southwestern Christian Advocate* microfilm, Louisiana and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

The Students' Orchestra performed for progressive and charitable events across the United States, such as the (Negro) Young People's Christian and Educational Conference hosted in Atlanta in August 1902 and the Young Men's Christian Association of New Orleans' Annual All-Star Concert and Banquet in 1906. The Students' Orchestra often sponsored charitable events, such as a concert for the benefit of the Phyllis Wheatley Sanitarium and a donation of mandolins to supply the young girls of the White Rose Mission Mandolin Club of New York.⁴¹

Professor Nickerson's musical talents reached beyond the classroom and private instruction. Two of his musical inventions included a soft pedal for an upright piano, and a

⁴¹ *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), January 20, 1898, February 1, 1900.

mandolin-and-guitar attachment for the piano. Although his patent for the mandolin-and-guitar attachment was approved on June 27, 1899, his patent for the soft pedal too closely resembled that of an existing attachment and was rejected.⁴²

Professor Nickerson also composed and arranged music. His most popular composition, “The Colored Boys of Uncle Sam,” reflected the pride of people of color in their participation in World War I. Through the assistance of local publishers Grunewald and Werlein’s, before the twentieth century Professor Nickerson published five additional pieces, including “New Era March, dedicated to Southern University,” “My Lovely Lou,” “Departure of the 9th U.S. V. Infantry,” “Col. Crane’s Colored Regiment,” and “The Paragon March.”⁴³

While Professor Nickerson’s musical accomplishments were acknowledged by his students and the city of New Orleans, one of his greatest accomplishments would come from his own home, his daughter, Camille. He was the most influential figure in Camille Nickerson’s childhood. Professor Nickerson instilled in her the appreciation for music, the arts, her cultural heritage, and education as a valuable profession. Born on March 30, 1888, Camille was her father’s second child and only daughter. Her mother died just before Camille’s eighth birthday, but she fondly recalled her earliest memories of mother’s participation in music with the rest of her family.⁴⁴ After losing her mother, Camille’s relationship with her father grew closer, as he was now her teacher and only parent.

Camille Nickerson’s recognition and appreciation of her musical heritage was apparent from a young age. In “Memorandum of Life and Work,” Camille wrote that musical study with

⁴² McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 83.

⁴³ LaBrew, “Black and White Scholarship Compared,” 24.

⁴⁴ Camille Nickerson, “Africo-Creole Music in Louisiana: A thesis on the plantation songs created by the Creole Negroes of Louisiana,” (master’s thesis, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, 1932) 1, Accessed June 12, 2018, Louisiana Division, City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library.

her father began at age six.⁴⁵ Just three years later, Camille began accompanying her father's orchestra and other popular musicians in New Orleans. Camille also joined her father in his church musical programs. Professor Nickerson and his family were active parishioners of St. Katharine's Church. Founded in the 1890s, St. Katharine's Parish became the first separate Catholic church for people of color in New Orleans, nearly three decades after Protestant African-Americans were allowed to found their own independent churches.⁴⁶ Professor Nickerson served for many years as the choirmaster at St. Katharine's, while Camille accompanied on the organ.⁴⁷ Professor Nickerson's religious devotion influenced Camille's lifelong dedication, drive, and passion for educating young musicians and using her talent to contribute and improve her communities from childhood throughout her careers as an educator, musician, and interpreter to local and national audiences.

In addition to his direct influence on his daughter, Professor W.J. Nickerson's professional career offers insight on the pedagogical environment of young Creole musicians in their schools, homes, and churches. When asked about the success and scope of her father's instruction, Camille Nickerson replied, "Well, everybody took piano lessons. In New Orleans, at that time, we had the French opera, and everybody was interested in music. You went to school and you went to music lessons. It was a natural thing."⁴⁸ In addition to "Sweet Emma" Barrett, Manuel Manetta, and Jelly Roll Morton, some of Professor Nickerson's most well-known

⁴⁵ Nickerson, "Memorandum of Life and Work," undated, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

⁴⁶ Douglas J. Slawson, "Segregated Catholicism: The Origins of Saint Katharine's Parish, New Orleans," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 141. Sometime between 1910 and 1919, the spelling of St. Katharine's had changed, altering the second *a* to an *e*.

⁴⁷ Nickerson to Father Werner, letter, October 15, 1960, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 23.

⁴⁸ McGinty, "Louisiana Lady," 83.

students include New Orleans saxophonists Harold Dejan and Theodore Purnell, string bassist Ed “Montudi” Garland, clarinetist Clem Raymond, and many others.

Many of Professor Nickerson’s former students remember his strict instruction methods and his emphasis on complete comprehension of the basics before allowing his pupils to move onto more difficult materials. In an interview with William Russell of the Hogan Jazz Archive, Harold Dejan recalled that he “studied clarinet for two years before Professor Nickerson allowed me to play a tune!” Although waiting must have been difficult for excited students, Dejan added that once a student was deemed ready, Nickerson would add them to his student band.⁴⁹

Professor Nickerson took great pride in his students and used his teaching techniques to assist them in fulfilling what he believed to be their true potential. According to scholar Green Polonius Hamilton, Professor Nickerson’s performance career dwindled in the early twentieth century, as “he preferred to shine through the excellence of his pupils of whom he has a host to make his worthy name enduring.”⁵⁰

An additional musical and pedagogical influence in Camille Nickerson’s life was her stepmother, Julia Ellen Lewis, a member of the Nickerson Ladies’ Orchestra and Professor Nickerson’s second wife. Born in 1879 to Colonel James Lewis, the Surveyor General of the United States’ Land Office, and Josephine Blanche Joubert, Julia Ellen Lewis was raised by two prominent Creole families of New Orleans, which provided her with access to private education. In 1892, Lewis graduated from Straight University in the College Preparatory and Normal Departments and continued her education at the New England Conservatory of Music.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Theodore Purnell (Interview by William Russell, Ralph Collins, Harold Dejan, Mrs. Purnell, February 3, 1961) Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

⁵⁰ Hamilton, 51.

⁵¹ Straight University Catalogue 1913-1933, Straight University Collection, Library Archives and Special Collections, Will. W. Alexander Library, Dillard University.

Julia Ellen Lewis actively contributed to her community as a musician, educator, and through various organizations in which she held leadership positions. She served as the president of the Thomy Lafon Auxiliary Society and as the secretary of the Louisiana and Mississippi chapter of the Women's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic. Lewis followed in the footsteps of her parents, as her father served as a department commander in the Grand Army of the Republic in Louisiana and Mississippi, and her mother, Josephine B. Lewis, served as the Women's Relief Corps' president from its inception in 1893 through 1895.⁵²

In October 1900, Lewis became the supervisor of music and drawing in the public schools for black children of New Orleans, where she served as a dedicated art instructor. In her annual report to Superintendent Warren Easton for the school year 1901-1902, Lewis provided a detailed evaluation of the drawing programs within the colored schools, arguing the importance of drawing and art in the education of young children for their betterment in other areas. Lewis passionately believed in her profession as an educator, and she closed her letter to the superintendent saying, "I have worked with one aim, the greater good of the child, and but one watchword, 'forward.'"⁵³

Lewis became a well-known cellist and violinist, performing at community concerts, local churches, and the Nickerson Young Ladies' Orchestra. On May 1, 1899, the Nickerson Students' Orchestra performed to a sellout audience at the Globe Hall near the French Quarter for its annual concert and even the standing areas were at full capacity. At this performance,

⁵² Journal of the National Convention of the Woman's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, Issue 19, (Boston: E.B. Stillings, 1901) 13, <https://books.google.com/books?id=TgMQAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:qTG1aiMgTAAC&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj1dXo1OLgAhUE16wKHcgODgEQ6AEwAXoECAQQAg#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁵³ Annual Report of the Board of Education and of the Superintendent of Schools of the City of New Orleans 1901-1902, (New Orleans: Mawberret's Printing House, 1903), 39-47, https://books.google.com/books?id=7qcNAQAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Lewis's violin solo "Gypsy Dances," accompanied by a violin quartette, was quoted by the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* as "the best number of the evening." *Southwestern Christian Advocate* gave her rave reviews, citing "her touch was that of a mature artist, her grace and ease were excellent, and each note was clear and enrapturing."⁵⁴ Lewis fulfilled many valuable roles within the Nickerson Ladies' Orchestra, including but not limited to violinist, concertmaster, tutor, assistant director, and cellist.⁵⁵ On August 3, 1904, Lewis married Professor Nickerson in what was called an "upper circle" social event celebrated in local and several national newspapers.⁵⁶ Following their marriage, Lewis resigned from her position in the public schools to support her husband and his musical department at Southern University.⁵⁷

On December 17, 1908, tragedy struck the Nickerson family once more as Julia Ellen Lewis Nickerson died. According to the *Daily Picayune*, the late Mrs. Nickerson was "a woman of most exemplary character, a devout Catholic, a kind, gentle, charitable spirit, and her premature demise at the age of only twenty-nine years is to be regretted."⁵⁸ After losing her own mother at a young age, the death of her stepmother proved difficult for Camille. Although dying young, Lewis' years with Camille positively influenced and encouraged Nickerson's continued musical education and community activism.

⁵⁴ *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), May 11, 1899.

⁵⁵ D. Antoinette Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981) 75-76.

⁵⁶ *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), July 31, 1904. *Cleveland Gazette*, August 13, 1904. *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.) August 13, 1904. *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.) August 13, 1904.

⁵⁷ *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), December 18, 1908.

⁵⁸ *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), December 18, 1908.

Camille Nickerson's Educational Opportunities

From an early age, Camille Nickerson was exposed to music and education through the private instruction of her father and other family members. Made possible by her family's financial standing, Nickerson was offered some of the best education that New Orleans could offer a young Creole woman of color. In her self-written "Memorandum of Life and Work," Nickerson recalled having attended a private school up to the sixth grade, and then she entered Southern University. According to the 1907-1908 Southern University Catalogue, Nickerson was a member of the following graduating classes: in 1900, the Music Department, in 1904, the Industrial Department, and in 1905, a high school graduate. In 1906 at age eighteen, Nickerson graduated from the Normal Department of Southern University.⁵⁹ Following her graduation, Nickerson began teaching grammar at Marigny School in New Orleans.⁶⁰

Though she excelled in her teaching career and musical performances in New Orleans, Nickerson was presented an opportunity to further her education at one of the most prestigious institutions in the country. In 1912, Camille enrolled in the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College, a predominantly white private college in Oberlin, Ohio, where she took courses in the study of piano major, pipe organ, ear training and sight singing, theory of music, history of music, vocal study and composition. Outside of her role as a student, Nickerson also worked as a musical instructor, teaching piano lessons to cover expenses in addition to directing two church choirs - a Catholic choir on Sunday mornings and a Methodist choir on Sunday evenings.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Southern University Catalogue 1907-1908, Southern University Archives, John B. Cade Library, Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁶⁰ *Directory of the New Orleans Schools, 1909-1910*, Orleans Parish School Board Collection, MSS 147, 40, Louisiana Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

⁶¹ Nickerson, "Memorandum of Life and Work," undated, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8. McGinty, "Louisiana Lady," 86.

In 1913, Professor Nickerson fulfilled a lifelong dream and established the Nickerson School of Music, where he and several able instructors taught students all branches of music.⁶² In 1916, when Camille graduated with Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from Oberlin College, she recalled her father saying, “Now you come back home and teach. Everybody can't go to Oberlin, so you bring Oberlin down to us.”⁶³ After four years away from the city and the musical culture that raised her, Nickerson, like many New Orleans musicians before and after her, was ready to return home to share what she had learned.

The Nickerson School of Music and the B-Sharp Music Club

Following her graduation from Oberlin College, Camille returned to her home in New Orleans to teach alongside her father at the Nickerson School of Music located in their home at 120 North Galvez Street. In its fourth year as an institution, the school offered vocal and instrumental music to its pupils with Camille heading the piano department and her father heading the violin and orchestra departments. Their school taught a wide variety of skills, advertising “piano, organ, theory, history of music, accompanying, and choral work” in addition to instrumental classes in violin, mandolin, cello, bass, cornet, clarinet, flute, trombone, drums, sight singing, and voice culture.⁶⁴ In February 1917, Camille drafted a letter to her Oberlin classmates in which she told of her aspirations with her father to create a nationally recognized School of Music in New Orleans. Camille related that their grand idea was “not only because of much talent which we find, but also because there is a great deal of ambition among music lovers and the field here is a splendid one.” Nickerson also wrote of her fondness for teaching her

⁶² *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), October 9, 1913.

⁶³ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 82.

⁶⁴ Nickerson to Oberlin classmates of 1916, letter, February 11, 1917, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 17.

young students in New Orleans and how often she found herself working overtime. Beryl Thornhill Richardson, a retired public school teacher from New Orleans and former student of the Nickerson School of Music, remembered Camille Nickerson as “an excellent teacher, demonstrating correct piano playing positions, technique of wrist control and all fundamentals. She played and sang for the class and clapped the rhythm. She was kind, thorough, impeccably dressed, and loved her students.”⁶⁵

One year after her return from Oberlin, Nickerson established an organization that would offer musical opportunities for the African-American youth of New Orleans for over a century. In 1917, Camille Nickerson founded the B-Sharp Music Club with twelve students from the Nickerson School of Music. According to Nickerson, her mission for the club was “to lead the pupils into a wider field of appreciation, study, and performances of the finest in musical literature.”⁶⁶ In 1921, the B-Sharp Music Club became a branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. After the B-Sharp Music Club became a part of the, the club inaugurated its first male member, Charles B. Rousseve, a prominent scholar in Creole history.⁶⁷

Nickerson’s organization of the B-Sharp Music Club reflected her attentiveness to detail and the fulfillment of her goal of a lasting community outreach program for musicians of color. The B-Sharp Music Club’s membership included three tiers: professional musicians, amateur musicians, and patrons of the arts. Members were considered active if residing locally, or

⁶⁵ Lillian Dunn Perry, *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, M-Z, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1993), 881.

⁶⁶ *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 6, 1967.

⁶⁷ Lucille Levy Hutton, “History of the B-Sharp Music Club,” in *Some Facts Concerning the B-Sharp Music Club* pamphlet, 1925, Collection 30, Box 2, Folder 3, B-Sharp Music Club, New Orleans Louisiana Records 1925-1983, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter cited as BSMC Records, Amistad).

associate if living outside New Orleans.⁶⁸ As stated in countless performance programs of the club, in the early years, the B-Sharp Music Club aspired to three aims: “To inspire our members, through well-planned monthly-meeting programs, to a greater love and appreciation of music; To foster in the community, through the monthly Pleasant Hour programs, a love of good music in general, and of Negro music in particular; To promote affairs of art featuring local and visiting artists, and, incidentally, to benefit artists, Club, and community.”⁶⁹ While these aims were ambitious, they support the argument that Nickerson and her colleagues were visionary thinkers who had created their own success and developed their own self-confidence through musical advancement, and they expressed a wish to enable the youth of their community to do the same.

In October 1922, the B-Sharp Music Club presented “A Pleasant Sunday,” intended to be a monthly meeting and performance of, what the members termed, an “interesting and instructive nature.”⁷⁰ After its initial success, the meetings became known as “The Pleasant Hour,” a free performance for the public and patrons of the club to increase community involvement. “Pleasant Hour” programs drew sizeable, admiring crowds, after which many local community members remarked on the instructive and inspirational character of the monthly performances. In addition to the “Pleasant Hour” programs, the B-Sharp Music Club sponsored Christmas, Mother’s Day, and Carnival programs that welcomed local and national musicians to the city of New Orleans. Many of these performances took place at iconic African American community locations,

⁶⁸ Carolyn Kolb, *New Orleans Memories: One Writer’s City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 214-218.

⁶⁹ “Some Facts Concerning the B-Sharp Music Club,” pamphlet, 1925, Collection 30, Box 2, Folder 3, BSMC Records, Amistad.

⁷⁰ Albert A. Edwards, “The Pleasant Hour,” in *Some Facts Concerning the B-Sharp Music Club* pamphlet, 1925, Collection 30, Box 2, Folder 3, BSMC Records, Amistad.

including Central Congregational Church, Booker T. Washington Auditorium, and black universities in New Orleans, such as Dillard and Xavier universities.

In the summer of 1922, the Junior B-Sharp Music Club was established for younger musicians from grades six through twelve. The Junior B-Sharp Music Club was similarly structured to the “Big B-Sharps” with an established system of officers, regular meetings, and performances. Their meetings took place on weekends at the Nickerson School of Music. According to Helen Maurice, president of the Junior B-Sharp Music Club in 1925, the young members took great pride and purpose in their role as Junior B-Sharps, as they respected their peers as musicians and influences. As many Junior B-Sharp members graduated into the B-Sharp Music Club, their participation fulfilled Camille’s goals of establishing a legacy of musical appreciation and advancement for future generations of African American youth in New Orleans.⁷¹

In a publication from the performance year 1924-1925, “Some Interesting Facts Concerning B-Sharp Music Club,” the club’s leadership summed up their achievements thus far with their motto, “Not how much, but how well.” The pamphlet described their hope that their labors would live on after them to “help make God’s world just a little better because of its music.” While the B-Sharp Music Club had begun with just a handful of members, the organization grew to become an important outlet for recreation and musical development for the New Orleans African American community, since stable programs for such extra-curricular activities were lacking in the public school system for black children. Many of the early B-Sharp Music Club members, such as Charles B. Rousseve, Lucille L. Hutton, and Lillian D. Perry, established a strong foundation of musical education that would shape New Orleans youth

⁷¹ Helen Maurice, “The History of the Junior B-Sharp Music Club” in *Some Facts Concerning the B-Sharp Music Club* pamphlet, 1925, Collection 30, Box 2, Folder 3, BSMC Records, Amistad.

through their roles in New Orleans public schools and the B-Sharp Music Club. Camille's network of dedicated and determined musicians and educators would be the root of the B-Sharp Music Club's success over the next century.

Even with her many commitments, Nickerson continued to expand her musical interests during her time in New Orleans. At home, Nickerson returned to her musical involvement in church, serving as the organist and director of the Holy Ghost Church Choir, and at different times, directing up to three large choruses in New Orleans.⁷² Away, Nickerson's talent for arranging, producing, accompanying, and instructing would open new doors for her beyond her hometown of New Orleans.

For the academic year of 1923-1924, Nickerson returned to Oberlin College for graduate coursework. During this year, under the direction of Professor Donald Morrisson, Nickerson trained and directed the Douglas Memorial Chorus, comprised of people of color from Oberlin College and students of the Conservatory of Music.⁷³ At Oberlin, Camille found a base where she could expand her profession as an educator and performer. Though Nickerson would return to New Orleans in 1924, her continued development through coursework at a prestigious school such as Oberlin College would open doors to new opportunities in her professional career.

Nickerson's experience in New Orleans as a female of color, student, performer, and educator provided a strong foundation that she built upon in her next career steps. In 1926, she accepted an offer to join the faculty of Howard University's prestigious School of Music. Nickerson had twice turned down offers from Howard, as she wanted to continue teaching with her father. After the third offer, however, Nickerson related that her father had told her, "Well,

⁷² "Miss Camille Nickerson Accepts Position at Howard University," Vol. 3 No. 5, article, undated, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

⁷³ Nickerson, "Memorandum of Life and Work," undated, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

you better go, because they won't ask you anymore."⁷⁴ Although she was hesitant to leave her father, their school, and the community she cared for, Nickerson decided to leave to share her talents with an even larger audience.

In 1926, after Nickerson's departure for Washington D.C., Mrs. Elvira M. Dungey became the director of the piano department at the Nickerson School of Music and the B-Sharp Music Club continued to grow and prosper.⁷⁵

Nickerson Takes on Howard University, Washington D.C.

Historian Doris E. McGinty has written of the opportunities for advancement provided by music and explored the activism of black women who were educators and activists in addition to their musical performance careers.⁷⁶ According to McGinty, in the late nineteenth century, many black female musicians also assumed leadership in various organizations, such as churches, schools, and social groups. McGinty argued that as educators first and foremost, their common goal was to enrich the status of the African-American, and believed that education offered that opportunity. Historically, institutions of higher education offered the best opportunities for the talents of female African American teachers, and even in the early years of the historically black colleges and universities, a few black women were hired to give instruction in music.

McGinty wrote that by the early twentieth century, black female performers were attracted to the faculties of historically black colleges and universities in surprisingly large numbers, both for financial security and for the chance to teach promising young students.

Across the country, discrimination had reduced the number of jobs available to African

⁷⁴ McGinty, "Louisiana Lady," 84.

⁷⁵ *Louisiana Weekly*, September 11, 1926.

⁷⁶ Doris E. McGinty, "'As Large as She Can Make It': The Role of Black Women Activists in Music, 1880-1945," in *Cultivating Music in America, Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*, ed. Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 214-236. McGinty served as a colleague of Nickerson's in the School of Music at Howard University.

American performers and limited the possibilities for national recognition. Bringing performers into the colleges as instructors proved desirable for both colleges and artists by increasing the opportunities for highly trained performers with extensive concert experience.

In the early twentieth century, the School of Music at Howard University progressed exponentially under the leadership of Lulu Vere Childers. In 1905, nine years after graduating from Oberlin College, Childers had taken over the music department at Howard University. By 1914, the department had transformed from a small music program into a Conservatory of Music, emphasizing standard classical European repertoire, and finally, in 1918 a School of Music.

Camille Nickerson embraced her dual careers as an educator and a musician at Howard University to better educate and impact her students. In her first year at the School of Music, Nickerson served as instructor of piano, and assisted other faculty in teaching piano, organ, orchestra, and combination courses in piano, which became known as theory.⁷⁷

During her first five years at Howard, Nickerson also actively participated in the leadership of the department, serving as a member of the Curriculum and Lectures committees. Nickerson also sponsored and was an honorary member of the Alpha Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, established at Howard University in 1913 as the first African-American sorority to receive a charter.⁷⁸ In 1927, Nickerson was inducted as a charter member into the Pi Kappa Lambda National Honor Society in Music at Oberlin College.⁷⁹ After the honor society's establishment at

⁷⁷ "1926-27: Catalog of the Officers and Students of Howard University" (1926), *Howard University Catalogs*, 49, <http://dh.howard.edu/hucatalogs/49>.

⁷⁸ "The Bison: 1929" (1929). *Howard University Yearbooks*. 109. https://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/109

⁷⁹ Simpson, 434.

Howard University in 1948, Nickerson also served as president and faculty advisor for the Alpha Delta Chapter of Pi Kappa Lambda at Howard University during her tenure.⁸⁰

While musical performance and education were focal points of Nickerson's careers, her involvement in many prominent activist organizations for musicians, females, and people of color provided her with important skills, networks, and opportunities to excel. Nickerson excelled in positions of leadership due to her appreciation for structure, passion for sharing her own knowledge, and drive to achieve success and recognition. Within her academic sphere of Washington D.C., Nickerson was a member of the American Association of University Women, Women's Faculty Club at Howard University, the Catholic Interracial Council, and the Round Table Club, a section of the Washington Music Teacher's Association. Nickerson also organized the Musician's Guild of Washington, D.C. and served as president until her sabbatical leave in 1939.⁸¹ Nickerson's membership and leadership in many of these institutions presented opportunities for her to perform and share her Creole folk music following the completion of her master's thesis in 1932.⁸²

Similar to her intricate network of influential women in the B-Sharp Music Club of New Orleans, Nickerson continued to surround herself with powerful women of color throughout her career in Washington, D.C. A few of these women include: Marian Anderson, American contralto superstar; Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera Company; and

⁸⁰ Howard University, "The Bison: 1949" (1949), *Howard University Yearbooks*, 118, https://dh.howard.edu/bison_yearbooks/118, 148. Howard University Calendar, "Pi Kappa Lambda Inducts 8 at 7th Annual Initiation," article, April 11, 1954, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 8.

⁸¹ For more information concerning Nickerson's memberships within these organizations, see "Personal Papers," CNP, Boxes 161-1 and -2. "Catholic Interracial Council, Radio Broadcast 'Faith of Millions Program' No. Cycle 2, Series 340, Creole Folk Songs," October 4, 1959, CNP, Box 161-4, Folder 9. Nickerson, 1940, resume, Box 2, Folder 4, BSMC Records, Amistad.

⁸² For a complete list of these locations, see Nickerson, "Places where I've been presented," undated, typed personal note, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

Mrs. James A. Myers, director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville, TN from 1928-1947.⁸³

By closely tying herself to other impactful women of color, Nickerson actively engaged with and embraced the many advantages that her network of noteworthy women of color could offer.

The National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc.

After leaving New Orleans in 1926, Nickerson continued her involvement in the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. Nickerson rose through the ranks, serving initially as assistant secretary, then secretary in 1926, vice president in 1930, president from 1935-1937, and then as a member of their board.⁸⁴ According to McGinty, Nickerson was one of only four female presidents to serve the organization from its inception in 1919 through 1942.⁸⁵

During her presidency, Nickerson accomplished much in promoting music education and performance opportunities for musicians of color. In a newsletter written in 1937 to her “co-workers in the cause of music,” Nickerson acknowledged the many successes of the organization during the previous two years of her presidency: for the first time, the offering of scholarships through competitive programs; making the *National Bulletin*, the publication of the association, a full-fledged magazine; establishing the National Association of Junior Branches to be overseen by the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc., and increasing the attendance at annual conferences.⁸⁶ As she did throughout her career, Nickerson thanked her fellow members and

⁸³ For more information concerning Nickerson’s personal and professional relationships with Anderson, Cardwell Dawson, and Myers, see: Nickerson, Camille, letters, 1929-1964, Marian Anderson Papers, ca. 1900-1993, MSS 200, Folder 4162, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. Nickerson, Camille, 1953-1961,” “Correspondence, 1934-1970,” National Negro Opera Company Collection, 1879-1997, Box 10, Folder 32, Library of Congress. Nickerson, diaries, 1937-1974, CNP, Box 161-5, 6. Mrs. James A. Myers to Nickerson, letters, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 16.

⁸⁴ Nickerson, “Memorandum of Life and Work,” handwritten personal resume, CNP, Box 161-1, folder 8.

⁸⁵ McGinty, *Cultivating Music in America*, 229. The female presidents of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. by 1942 include: Lillian LeMon 1932-1934; Maude Roberts George 1934-1935; Camille Nickerson 1935-1937; and Mary Cardwell Dawson 1939-1941.

⁸⁶ Nickerson, “The President’s Message,” article, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 19.

focused on the inclusion and encouragement of children in their organization. On May 18, 1937, Nickerson presented “An Evening of Creole Music,” a performance sponsored by the Junior Branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc.⁸⁷

In August 1962, Camille Nickerson was presented an award at the National Conference for the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. held at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas by president Kenneth Brown Billups for her lifetime of achievements in the organization, musical pedagogy, and Creole folk music.



Figure 2. This photograph captured Camille Nickerson receiving an award for her lifetime of achievements at the National Conference of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. from president Kenneth Brown Billups. “Photographs – National Association of Negro Musicians,” August 1962, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-15, Folder 2, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C.

⁸⁷ “An Evening in Creole Music,” program, May 18, 1937, CNP, Box 161-4, Folder 3.

The Junior Preparatory Department of the School of Music at Howard University

The focus on the inclusion of children was evident in Nickerson's work at Howard University, as she was integral in the establishment of Howard's Junior Department of the School of Music, also known as the Junior Preparatory Department. Nickerson served as the head of the department for most of her tenure.⁸⁸ The Junior Department prepared younger students, ranged from preschool to high school graduates, for future musical study in the School of Music. The more talented students would work toward earning a degree from the School of Music, while others would use their skills in other career tracts.⁸⁹ According to Nickerson, the mission of the Junior Department of Music was "to serve as a cultural agent by offering music instruction to young people interested in music for vocational and recreational reasons, to prepare young students for entrance into recognized schools of music, and to serve as a laboratory for college classes in Piano Pedagogy."⁹⁰

Similar to her aspirations for the B-Sharp Music Club and the community of New Orleans, Nickerson's goals for Howard's Junior Department's faculty and students included mutual development and long-term achievement. The department began with just eighteen students and grew into the hundreds within a few years. At its inception, the Junior Department accepted all students who submitted an application. As enrollment rapidly grew and available facilities, such as teaching space and faculty offices, became limited, the program only accepted students who showed promise of musical achievement.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Nickerson, 1940, resume, Box 2, Folder 4, BSMC Records, Amistad.

⁸⁹ Nickerson, 1940, resume, Box 2, Folder 4, BSMC Records, Amistad.

⁹⁰ "Chapter IV, Proposed Program," typed document, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 16.

⁹¹ Nickerson to Mr. and Mrs. Elmo Williams, undated letter, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 29.

In the Junior Department, along with instruction in performance, the older piano methods students, also taught by Nickerson, developed their teaching skills.⁹² By involving the older students in the instruction of younger musicians, Nickerson's classes promoted an environment of growth and mentorship that would benefit students of all ages. Nickerson's establishment of the Junior Department reinforced her idea that beginning musical instruction at an earlier age is most beneficial for students in fulfilling their musical potential. Nickerson believed that the community of Washington D.C. benefitted from the Junior Department of the School of Music, as she received praises for her students' participation in seasonal performances at local schools and churches.⁹³



Figure 3. A photograph of the Junior Music Department classes in 1942. Camille Nickerson is pictured in the top row, nine people over from the right side. "Howard University Junior Preparatory School Photographs," 1942, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-19 "Oversized," Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁹² "1928-29: Catalog of the Officers and Students of Howard University" (1928). *Howard University Catalogs*. 51. <http://dh.howard.edu/hucatalogs/51>

⁹³ Nickerson, 1940, resume, Box 2, Folder 4, BSMC Records, Amistad.

In a written exercise found in a class scrapbook that Nickerson kept, young students were asked to explain their thoughts on what the study of music had meant to them. Their responses included: “Music has taught me how to appreciate the finer things in life.” “Music has and will always be a source of pleasure, and in the words of a renowned composer, ‘Music is love in search of a word.’” “The study of music on the practical side and also on the theoretical side affords many profits.”⁹⁴ While this activity may have been a routine exercise, the pleasure and gratitude that each student shared speaks for their respect for their teacher and the level of engagement provided in her department. When asked of their memory of Nickerson, former Junior Department students remembered her fondly as being “no nonsense” and having had an “iron fist and velvet glove.” Many of the students also admired her emphasis on proper decorum, manners, appearance, and behavior.⁹⁵ Nickerson undoubtedly had adopted this attitude toward discipline for music from her father, and she made sure that her students showed respect to the music, their performance, and themselves.

Throughout her career as an educator, Nickerson was motivated to continue learning and improving her musical skills and teaching techniques. During the academic year of 1939-1940, Nickerson attended the Juilliard School of Music and Columbia University Teachers College for graduate study. Nickerson recalled that her courses focused on piano, piano and theory methods, appreciation for young children, voice and composition, where she focused on the harmonization and arrangements of Creole folk music.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ “What the Study of Music Has Meant to Me,” letters within a scrapbook, CNP, Box 161-19.

⁹⁵ Sandra G. Shannon, “Camille Nickerson: ‘The Louisiana Lady’, 1888-1982,” ed. Jesse Carney Smith in *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992), 805.

⁹⁶ Nickerson, 1940, resume, Box 2, Folder 4, BSMC Records, Amistad.

While fulfilling her highest potential as an educator was a goal for Nickerson, a separate track of her career would use her ability to educate, perform and interpret music to fulfill a parallel goal: drawing from her own Creole heritage, she would interpret and perform music in order to preserve a part of her history that she feared was being lost. Through a master's thesis, she was begin her campaign for the recognition of Creole folk music, thus a distinct Creole ethnicity.

Nickerson's Return to Creole Folk Music

Although Camille Nickerson's interest in Creole folk music began in her childhood and the music had resurfaced throughout her early career, it was a life changing crisis that turned her attention more fully to the preservation of this music. Nickerson recalled her first experience with arranging Creole folksongs at the favor of Edna Thomas, a local singer from New Orleans:

I asked my father if he knew any (folksongs), and he asked cousins and friends, and we just swept up a lot of them in the interests of Miss Edna Thomas. I gathered up five and presented them to her, and she asked me to arrange them because she was a singer who did not have a theoretical background and could not do this. So I arranged all five and handed them to her. As I think about that now, I wonder how in the world I could have done such a thing. But this did point out to me that these were important songs, which should be known.⁹⁷

After arriving in Washington D.C. in 1926, Nickerson continued balancing her musical career between instruction at the School of Music at Howard University and additional performances on campus and in her local community. Between 1927 and 1928, Nickerson performed in a few programs at Howard University as a presenter of Creole folk songs and an accompanist to her students.⁹⁸

In the fall of 1927, Camille Nickerson returned to New Orleans to perform as a guest pianist with the Nickerson Orchestra, assisted by Alma Hubbard, soprano, at First Street M.E.

⁹⁷ McGinty, "The Louisiana Lady," 83.

⁹⁸ Performance pamphlets, 1927-1928, CNP, Box 161-4, Folder 1.

Church. Her arrival was well received, complete with a full-page spread of compliments and congratulations from local organizations and businesses in the *Louisiana Weekly* welcoming Camille back to her hometown.

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Figure 4. This full-page advertisement welcoming Camille Nickerson back to New Orleans was printed in the *Louisiana Weekly* on September 10, 1927. Note the genre of company and patrons who published an advertisement in her first return to her hometown. *Louisiana Weekly* microfilm, Louisiana and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

But just four and a half months after her celebratory return to New Orleans, Camille was again faced with unbearable loss. Although rumors circulated that her father had committed

suicide on February 7, 1928 at the age of sixty-two, the coroner's report classified the cause of death as "asphyxiation." According to the *Louisiana Weekly*, Camille's brother Dalton and their paternal aunt, Anna Bertrand, refuted the rumors and Professor Nickerson was buried in St. Louis Cemetery #2, thus acknowledging that the Catholic church accepted that Professor Nickerson had not taken his own life.⁹⁹

Having lost her father just a month short of her fortieth birthday, Camille recalled feeling "too grief-stricken to go on with my normal duties, but before too long I realized that the thing to do was to carry on in the way which would please him."¹⁰⁰ Nickerson knew that her father would want her to persevere and continue the careers in what they had both poured their hearts into. She began to immerse herself in the arrangement of Creole folk music in memory of her father and her musical childhood.

By the late 1920s, Camille's professional career as an educator was blossoming at Howard University. Nickerson began to formulate a project to collect the music. She marshaled her gift for organization and collaboration and by September 1928, she had begun gathering support for her study. She corresponded with Drs. Edward Dickinson and George W. Andrews, former professors at Oberlin, and historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who had established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. In their letters, they praised Nickerson's ideas and goals of preserving Creole folk music. In a letter to Woodson, Dickinson strongly supported Nickerson's project, stating, "By reason of musical training, intellectual ability, and peculiar opportunity due to her race connections and environment, it seems to me that Miss

⁹⁹ *Louisiana Weekly*, February 11, 1928. Al Kennedy to Charles E. Nolan, letters, March 16-22, 1995, Private collection, Al Kennedy.

¹⁰⁰ Nickerson to Father Werner, letter, October 15, 1960, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 23.

Nickerson is admirably fitted for this collecting, editing, and historical work which she desires to perform.”¹⁰¹

In February 1929, Nickerson appealed to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Advisory Committee on Interracial Relations for a grant to support her research. Will W. Alexander, a member of the SSRC Advisory Committee, communicated with Nickerson, encouraging her to elaborate on her plans and specify which university would sponsor her.¹⁰² Nickerson followed his advice. She presented letters of support written by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the first black president of Howard University; Dr. Edward Dickinson of the Oberlin Conservatory; Drs. R. Nathaniel Dett and Harry T. Burleigh, folk music experts; and historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson.¹⁰³ With this powerhouse of professionals behind her, Nickerson showed confidence in her plan for research. She defended her writing abilities, outlined a schedule of work, and argued for the value of her topic. Alexander expressed to Nickerson and Johnson that his committee supported the project and encouraged Nickerson to strengthen her proposal because the SSRC had yet to approve a project of this nature. Nickerson’s project received approval from Alexander’s committee, but was rejected by a separate committee in April 1929.¹⁰⁴

Although rejection was disappointing, the process and correspondence related to her application strengthened Nickerson’s proposal to study and collect Creole folk music through an

¹⁰¹ Dickinson to Woodson, letter, September 8, 1928, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 16.

¹⁰² Alexander to Nickerson, letter, February 19, 1929, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 12.

¹⁰³ Nickerson to Alexander, letters, February 20, March 18, 1929, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 12.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander to Nickerson, letter, April 16, 1929, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 12. Founded in 1917 by Sears, Roebuck and Company entrepreneur Julius Rosenwald, the Fund’s Fellowship Program awarded grants to countless African American writers, educators, artists and scholars, as well as southern whites with interests in race relations, until the fund terminated in 1948 due to lack of funding.

academic frame and benefitted her in the long run. On November 11, 1930, Nickerson appealed to the Committee on Grants for Fellowships from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to pursue her study of Creole folk music.¹⁰⁵ In her application, Nickerson wrote that she wished to conduct this study under the direction of the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin. Her thesis would be written as a combination of literary and musical themes to produce a critical analysis of “The Colored Creoles of Louisiana and Their Music.” Nickerson argued that although music and literary critics Henry E. Krehbiel and Lafcadio Hearn had established a limited introduction to the existence to a distinct Creole folk music and culture, more work needed to be done. By collecting her findings in the Creole *patois*, Nickerson contended that she would preserve the Creole songs in the variation of the French language in which most Creole folk songs were written. Nickerson termed the *patois* the “correct language” for the songs, and she would accompany the written music with language translations. Nickerson also emphasized the urgency of her work. “Because the sources of information are becoming more and more scarce due to the rapid passing of the older generations from whom one could obtain a deal of first-hand information, it is quite urgent that this study is begun as soon as possible.”¹⁰⁶

She proposed to begin the study in June 1931 and remain on leave from Howard University until October 1932. Nickerson’s grant proposal not only revealed her aspirations for her immediate work, but also how she intended the material to be utilized long-term as part of her strategic planning to collect and interpret Creole folk music, and by doing so, argue for a distinct Creole culture. While Nickerson saw this experience as an opportunity for her own growth in musical arrangement, she also viewed the project as a way to bring what she believed

¹⁰⁵ Nickerson to Rosenwald Foundation, drafted letter, November 11, 1930, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 12.

¹⁰⁶ Nickerson to Rosenwald Foundation, drafted letter, November 11, 1930, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 12.

to be historically and musically valuable folk music, and by extension, her culture, into the public sphere as it had yet to be acknowledged.

In January 1931, the Julius Rosenwald Fund awarded Nickerson a \$1000 fellowship to complete her master's thesis on Creole folk music.¹⁰⁷ After years of pursuing academic and financial support, Nickerson finally had the opportunity to pursue her aspiration. According to Sandra G. Shannon, Professor Emerita of African American Literature in the English Department at Howard University, Nickerson's mission was to raise the Creole folksongs to a level of high art "in direct contrast to the exotic primitive billing given to them by G. William Nott, Edward Tinker, and other contemporaries caught up in the fashionable myth of the primitive Negro so prevalent in the mid to late twenties."¹⁰⁸ As planned, Nickerson started her research in the parishes of south Louisiana in the summer of 1931 and continued through the submission of her thesis in the spring of 1932. Camille Lucie Nickerson's master's thesis would serve as a catalyst for her mission to share Creole history and folk music with a wider audience, while gaining acknowledgment of the distinctiveness of her culture and music. Nickerson's knowledge of and dedication to Creole folk music would grow in the coming years through opportunities for performances and publications.

"... and Her History": Nickerson's master's thesis

An analysis of Nickerson's master's thesis sheds light onto her view of her people. Her research not only argues for the existence of a distinct Creole culture and its folk music, dances, and street cries, but also explores its history and the value in remembering the contributions to music of people of color from Louisiana who identified as Creole. Just as Desdunes before her,

¹⁰⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, January 31, 1931.

¹⁰⁸ Sandra G. Shannon, "Camille Lucie Nickerson Remembered: The Role of the "Louisiana Lady" in Preserving Louisiana's Afro-Creole Folk Music," *Louisiana Literature* (Fall 1990), 69.

Nickerson argued for Creole people to maintain their own identity and heritage for the future of their culture, but also for universal acknowledgment of their existence and contributions to musical history.

Nickerson's thesis opens with an introduction to folk music, where she articulates that "because of the charm of this simplicity and freshness, and because there is naturally a bond of human interest between one who sings a folk tune and one who listens to it, there is in it always a powerful appeal."¹⁰⁹ She claims that the most significant contribution to American folk music came from the black population of the South, which Nickerson divided into two distinct categories: Afro-American Negroes and the Afro-Creoles.¹¹⁰ The Afro-American Negroes, she argued, were responsible for the creation of Spirituals, a type of religious song that originated among them, while the Afro-Creoles produced the Creole folk songs as a reflection of their own distinct society. In this categorization of American people of color, Nickerson is also claiming two distinct ethnicities and declaring the existence of the Afro-Creole and thus their right to a distinct history and culture. While she argued that both Afro-American and Afro-Creole genres of song were created by people of color within the bounds of plantation-life in the American South, Nickerson contends that the cultural differences drawn from the distinctive European origins of their enslavers provided two separate frameworks from which they developed. In doing so, Nickerson argued against a monolithic black community.

Being of Creole descent and raised within a musical family, Nickerson's writing communicates the respect she held for Creole folk music and the determination she felt to use her public platform to give this genre of music the respect she believed it deserved, thus giving her

¹⁰⁹ Nickerson, 1.

¹¹⁰ Nickerson, 2.

people a definite history. Nickerson describes her introduction to Creole folk music at an early age, by recalling a fond memory from her childhood:

It came about on the occasion when as a very small child, I beheld my father playing an accompaniment in double-stops on his violin to a most attractive, jolly little tune – one Suzanne, Belle Femme. My father also sang the tune as he played its accompaniment. But the sole performer in this interesting picture was my great grandmother who, with a brightly colored tignon, or head-handkerchief, tied neatly around her head, made graceful play with a madras handkerchief, which she held by its corners, while she danced gaily up and down and all around, unable to resist the strains of Suzanne. She danced with an agility remarkable for one of her age and with a gay abandon that made all of the onlookers forget their troubles for some time to come. Such was the effect of Grandmere’s happy presence and the dear little Creole song.¹¹¹

While Nickerson attributes her intimate recollection of such music as common within many Creole homes, she outlines why these popular songs and dances may have been lost to history. First, she notes the difficulty notating the varied styles of intonations and complicated rhythms.¹¹² Two other difficulties in preserving and locating the Creole folk music involve how the songs were used and the language in which they were created. Nickerson writes that, unlike Spirituals, Creole folk songs were not passed down from previous generations as a routine of their religious life, thus, not retained by frequent use.

Nickerson also examines the language shift between the generations of Creole people. She states that the Creole *patois*, used by Afro-Creole slaves who had French-speaking masters, required “fewer words in which to say the same thing, with a certain emphasis on intonation and any deficiency of expression was supported by gestures.”¹¹³ As the younger generations began to accept the English language, and reject the Creole *patois*, the language in which the Creole

¹¹¹ Nickerson, 4-5. Nickerson, “Questionnaire,” 1954, Ray M. Lawless Collection, 1952-1965, Box 5, Folder 156, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. In this questionnaire, Nickerson recalled that her maternal grandmother and great-grandmother sang ballads and folksongs throughout her childhood.

¹¹² Nickerson, 8.

¹¹³ Nickerson, 20.

folksongs originated, the songs themselves were getting lost to memory.¹¹⁴ Nickerson believes that this loss of language directly correlated to the loss of Creole identity, for without understanding the French language and its corresponding shift known as the *patois*, the Creole folk songs and their rich heritage would be lost on the younger and future generations. Despite these difficulties, Nickerson was determined to collect and circulate this lesser-known musical genre. By pursuing Creole folk music through an academic lens, she hoped to elevate this music as worthy of academic study.

In order to provide clarity for her audience, Nickerson assesses her interpretation of the word *Creole*. Considering her perspective as a self-described Creole and her goal of achieving acknowledgment for this distinct genre of music, she carefully articulates the varying perspectives on the word to develop her research in a holistic context. While her thesis was completed in 1932, Nickerson's findings echo modern historians, such as Louisiana historian Joseph R. Tregle, Jr., who believed that "creole has meant a variety of things to a variety of different societies, a simple reflection of the reality that language represents a consensus of the people who create it."¹¹⁵ Nickerson traces the chronology of all of the populations who settled in Louisiana, emphasizing the inclusion of not only French and Spanish settlers, but those of African descent as well as the indigenous peoples of Louisiana. Nickerson pointed out what she saw as a distinct racial tension between professed white Creoles, of European descent, and the Creoles of color, with African ancestry, as well as the social implications of the identity once the Americanized idea of race and division became dominant.

¹¹⁴ Nickerson, 9.

¹¹⁵ Joseph R. Tregle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 137.

Following her definitions and understandings of the term *Creole*, Nickerson describes the many variants of Creole people of “all tints and hues,” as defined by Lafcadio Hearn.¹¹⁶ Hearn referred to the “Afro-Creole” as those in the Creole community who had the greatest proportion of “Negro blood,” and Nickerson believes that this group of Creole people were responsible for creating the Creole folksongs. Here, she clearly states whom she defines as Creole, the distinction among the Afro-Creoles, and how these differences are reflected in the music.

Nickerson firmly believes that “there is a great love and reverence for music in the heart of the Colored Creole.”¹¹⁷ She suggests that their environment encouraged their musical talents through the influence of folk music and opera, two popular musical styles in New Orleans available to all classes and ethnicities.¹¹⁸ While these two genres of music may seem considerably different, their affinity in the lives of Creole people reflects a larger narrative of duality as a part of life in New Orleans and areas of southern Louisiana.¹¹⁹ Nickerson’s family was accustomed to the nature of duality in New Orleans culture, as she reminisced fond memories of each musical style from her childhood:

I can distinctly recall the soft sweet voice of my mother or my grandmother humming parts of Faust, Rigoletto, and others; and my great-aunt and uncle

¹¹⁶ Nickerson, 17.

¹¹⁷ Nickerson, 25.

¹¹⁸ Connie Zeanah Atkinson, “Opera in New Orleans,” unpublished lecture, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56. Henry Louis Gates, literary and musical historian, suggested that the historical root to this theory of duality comes from the trickster character of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara, who is said to have spoken out of both sides of his mouth. Esu-Elegbara was also known as the deity of chance and choice. As the African folkloric roots developed and expanded over time, New Orleans’ culture firmly expressed many juxtaposed opposites. For instance, the integration of sacred and secular, joy and sorrow, crowds of people celebrating on Mardi Gras Day followed by long lines surrounding the St. Louis Cathedral on Ash Wednesday, the somber music that begins a funeral procession to the rejoicing of life and dance that ended it, and the rigorous musical education of many New Orleans musicians with the creative freedom and improvisation that created jazz, are important themes often omitted from New Orleans music scholarship, including the embrace of both classical and popular music.

would often tell me which much delight of their favorite operas and actresses. Also, I can recall, with happy reminiscence, hearing my father play upon his violin different arrangements of the operas, known as Fantasias, so popular in the day.¹²⁰

Nickerson's association of her family's enjoyment of popular music and culture reflects how intertwined New Orleans society and music had been since its earliest days. The connection of opera and classical music to people who simultaneously appreciated Creole folk music argued Nickerson's point that the Creole people of Louisiana and their love for music are inseparable, due to who they are and where they lived. Referring to folk music as the legacy of the Creole people, Nickerson furthers her personal connection with each style as evidence of her argument:

The other influence was that of folk music, a heritage of the old country, brought by the French ancestors and which influenced all. These were their musical dowry, so to speak, and were sung by all who knew the French tongue. So that today, any Creole can readily remember and sing them. "Au Clair de la Lune", the dear little tune, favorite of all France is a case in point. Only last summer was it sung to me by two Colored Creoles at the mere mention of it, and with great delight.¹²¹

Due to a lack of educational opportunities, she argues, many Creoles of color did not understand the French language in which both the French opera and French folk tunes were sung. Consequently, during the eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries, the Afro-Creole slaves created a new form of folk song with Spanish, French, and African components that would become what is known as Creole folk music.

The Afro-Creoles, she writes, sang of many things, such as romance, lullabies, and satire, though rarely of sorrow. Creole folksongs were simple in their melodic and harmonic nature, though supplemented by intentional and curious short phrases. Throughout her thesis, Nickerson

¹²⁰ Nickerson, 25.

¹²¹ Nickerson, 25.

further examines the structure of various forms of Creole folk songs, as their rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic composition illustrate their intricacy and individual style. In reference to structure of the folksongs, Nickerson acknowledges the difficulty of balance in arranging folk music. She believes that in order to arrange such music authentically, an understanding and sympathy to the background of the tune is key, though overanalyzing the music could cause the tune to lose its charm and simplistic appeal.

In addition to Creole folksongs, Nickerson also reviews the styles of Creole folk dances, or *counjailles*, and the instruments that accompanied the dances as important forms of religious ceremony and recreational activity.¹²² Nickerson argues that the creation of the Creole folk music was inevitable, “for not only were his native and environmental influences conducive to musical expression, but also inasmuch as music was his best and most comforting outlet, every experience of his life was translated to music, and found expression in the song and in the dance.”¹²³

By providing historical context for her research, Nickerson provides her audience with her interpretation of Creole folk music, and thus, the distinction of Creole people, not simply their African roots. Nickerson emphasizes the character and features of Creole folk music as influenced by three distinct cultures: French, Spanish, and African.

From the French, the naïve plaintiveness of the light-hearted tunes happily sung to children, or songs telling of the joys or sorrows of love; from the Spanish a deeper romance, a more subdued sentiment, and in some instances, a softening effect of the rhythms through the use of the triplet; from the African, mainly the rhythmic contribution, but also the oddities of intonation (mostly in songs connected with the “Voodoo” rites, and a strong feeling for satire which will be mentioned under

¹²² Nickerson, 60-71.

¹²³ Nickerson, 45.

the section of Classification.) Little wonder then that they are an unusual, interesting, and charming group!¹²⁴

Some of the popular Creole folksongs about romance that Nickerson arranged were “Chere Mo Lemme Toi” and “Ai Suzette.” While “Chere Mo Lemme Toi” illustrates the playful side of romance by discussing how the singer loves his significant other “like a little pig loves mud,” “Suzette” tells the story of unrequited love, as a young plantation suitor will do all he can to win Suzette’s hand, though she refuses him time and time again.¹²⁵ While Nickerson explains that the majority of the melodies and harmonies of Creole folk songs were romantic, there were also popular satirical songs and lullabies. For example, “Toucoutou” tells of a suitor’s revenge for the beautiful octaroon, Toucoutou, as her simple rejection humiliated him, while “Danse Conni Conné,” or “Dance Baby, Dance,” is a playful nursery song to be sung to children before going to bed.¹²⁶

In addition to the folksongs and dances, Nickerson collected and arranged numerous street cries from countless vendors of New Orleans, a part of her culture that was quickly fading from memory. Nickerson describes the many vendors who filled the streets with their cries, such as the milk man, the praline woman, the blackberry woman, and the ice cream man. The “Ice Cream Man” would sing many popular tunes and change the lyrics to fit his own humor, while accompanying himself on the accordion. Nickerson recalls his familiar yell, “I-ce Cream!! Dem wut got money come and buy. Dem wut ain’t got, sat down an’ cry!”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Nickerson, 44.

¹²⁵ Nickerson, 54, 60.

¹²⁶ Nickerson, 55, 56.

¹²⁷ Nickerson, 73.

Nickerson argues that the street cries were central to the charm of the city due to the industry that developed from the marketing of local vendors over many years. Although technological advances had made these practices out of date, Nickerson claims that the advertisements are still worthy of acknowledgment as a distinct musical style. In reference to the unfamiliar silence, Nickerson laments, “there is a hush through the streets and there has passed one of the most interesting customs of our city of many charms – Old New Orleans.”¹²⁸ As she reasons for the preservation of street cries, Nickerson emphasizes that the fading of these cultural practices from relevance does not justify that they should be lost.

Nickerson’s closing section offers a brief introduction to “*Les Gens de Coulers*,” free people of color, who she believed had been unjustly ignored by history and the general public.¹²⁹ Nickerson praises the writing of Rodolphe L. Desdunes, whose work *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (Our People, Our History), is one of the only histories of the Creole people. Originally published in 1911 in French, it provided a detailed account of various accomplishments of artists, educators, and musicians that were free people of color. She also references one of the first anthologies of poems written by an American community of color, *Les Cenelles*, which was self-published in New Orleans in 1845 by seventeen Louisiana Creoles.¹³⁰ Their title translates to “holly berries,” which Nickerson explains were “indigenous to the soil and of modest growth.”¹³¹ While Nickerson’s analysis of the name matches other explanations of her time, historian Jerah Johnson added to the translation; “haws, specifically mayhaw berries.” His conclusion

¹²⁸ Nickerson, 75.

¹²⁹ Nickerson, 76.

¹³⁰ Desdunes, 10. For a full listing and biographical information on each author, see Chapters II “*Les Cenelles* – Mr. Armand Lanusse and His Times,” III “A Dedication – The Collaborators of *Les Cenelles* – Some Biographical Sketches,” and IV “The Collaborators of *Les Cenelles* (Continuation) – Biographical Sketches.”

¹³¹ Nickerson, 77.

supplemented Nickerson's admiration of the authors' syntax, agreeing that "by subtly and poetically evoked the image of small, uniquely flavored, and rare local delicacies that struggled for life in surroundings so hostile as to make the very gathering of them a dangerous travail, but one worth the risk because of the richness of the reward."¹³²

While her reflections on Desdunes and other Creoles of color stray from her musical analysis, Nickerson uses this method to argue that Creole folk music and culture had contributed heavily to musical history and deserved of public acknowledgment as a distinctive culture. She also links her work with theirs. As a woman of color with a well-respected academic reputation, she uses her position to highlight the absence of people of color from the historical record. In this case, and through informal performance narratives, by emphasizing the importance of Creole folk music and the contributions of Creoles of color to classical music, Nickerson brings both into the historical discussion.

Nickerson's conclusion that Creoles of color have contributed significantly to American music and are a distinct group of people argues that the Creole folk genre must "receive the recognition so much and so long deserved, taking their place in the annals of musical history and of musical literature and art."¹³³ Through her research and arrangement, Nickerson provides her audience with the historical context and musical make-up of the Creole folksongs, dances, and street cries. She recognizes that by the late 1920s, Creole folk music had seen a growth in interest; however, her work differed in that she did not present it as an oddity or as simplistic.

In her biographical article about Nickerson, Sandra G. Shannon states that "unlike many who studied musical traditions of the Afro-Creole as curious outsiders, Camille Nickerson

¹³² Jerah Johnson, "Les Cenelles: What's in a Name?," *Louisiana History* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 410.

¹³³ Nickerson, 84.

brought to it much needed sensitivity due, in large part, to her own identity as an Afro-Creole and the early encouragement she received from her father who instilled in her an unwavering love and respect for her culture.”¹³⁴ By expressing her beliefs within an academically researched and published document, Nickerson advocated for her own acceptance and identity as a musical professional. This dedication and commitment to sharing Creole folk music would transform her career in the following decade.

On May 23, 1932, Camille Nickerson submitted her thesis, “Africo-Creole Music in Louisiana: A thesis on the plantation songs created by the Creole Negroes of Louisiana,” and shortly after was awarded the degree of Master of Music. After receiving her degree, Nickerson returned to Howard University to resume teaching at the School of Music. But now, as a product of her master’s research, Nickerson had a collection of Creole songs arranged for voice and piano accompaniment that she now planned to present to the public. She would make the Creoles of Louisiana and their folk music known by having the folksongs published and encouraging popular concert artists to sing them. At first, finding enthusiastic publishers proved difficult due to lack of awareness and the economics of the Great Depression. Although Nickerson would eventually have some of her arrangements published, she admitted that the early years of presentation were not as fruitful as she had hoped.¹³⁵

Many well-known artists, such as Mattiwilda Dobbs and Camilla Williams, performed several of Nickerson’s arrangements to popular acclaim; however, they would usually allot only one or two songs to a program within a performance year. While Nickerson was appreciative of the publicity and praise, she declared that the sharing of Creole folk music “wasn’t going fast

¹³⁴ Shannon, “Camille Lucie Nickerson Remembered: The Role of the “Louisiana Lady” in Preserving Louisiana’s Afro-Creole Folk Music,” 67.

¹³⁵ Nickerson, “What has happened since 31-32,” resume, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

enough” for her.¹³⁶ Consequently, Nickerson would again use the advantages that her life had offered her, such as a musical education and a powerful network of colleagues, along with her own drive and ambition to take Creole folk music to a new level of performance and recognition.

Becoming the “Louisiana Lady,” 1932-1962

Camille Lucie Nickerson’s first semi-professional performance of Creole folksongs happened in an unexpected fashion. While staying with her cousin in New Iberia, Louisiana, Nickerson had received an invitation from the parish priest to perform at a local Catholic church. Nickerson recalled:

I was dressed in Creole costume and sang for about an hour and a half, and was very well received. Now this was a white audience; such a thing was unheard of in Louisiana, especially in the rural section such as this was. The enthusiasm of the audience showed me what an impact the Creole song could have.¹³⁷



Figure 5. The “Louisiana Lady” in her full costume standing aside the piano she would play during her lecture-recitals. “Camille Nickerson Performing,” photograph, undated, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-14, Folder 3, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹³⁶ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 88.

¹³⁷ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 88.

The “Creole costume” that Nickerson mentioned became an iconic aspect of her performances. According to historian Anne Key Simpson, the concept of costume concerts had been introduced to Western audiences in the first decade of the twentieth century by artists such as Betty Lee, Princess Tsinia, and Eva Gauthier with their respective genres of songs of the South, Indian lore, and Javanese songs. These presentations were a form of “virtual tourism” popular during this time, in which local audiences “traveled” to exotic places through presentations and dioramas of song, dance, or art.¹³⁸ To Simpson’s knowledge, none of these singers used their own musical arrangements or accompaniments like Nickerson would.¹³⁹ Nickerson’s charming stage presence was enriched by a floor-length dress complete with a hooped-crinoline undergarment. Her long and wavy dark hair was often gently placed behind her ear with a delicate flower comb. Nickerson’s pleasant appearance paired with her traditional Creole folk music provided a window into the past for the audiences to enjoy.

To accomplish her personal mission to have the Creole folksongs be known to the public, Nickerson strategically planned her costume, program, and even her title: “I knew that wearing the costume was helpful in arousing the interest of the audience, and I wanted a title that would capture interest. The Louisiana Lady seemed to do it... So, I just donned an outfit and started singing them myself, making the whole program songs and street cries.”¹⁴⁰ With her charming songs and sentimental costume, Nickerson became known as the “Louisiana Lady” and her performances would bring Creole folksongs to stages across the United States and into Europe.

¹³⁸ See for instance, Chris Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: On the Road Again*, (Clevedon, UK: Channelview Publications, 2005).

¹³⁹ Simpson, 447-448.

¹⁴⁰ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 88.

While each performance was adjusted to best suit each audience, many of Nickerson's performances were structured as lecture-recitals. Nickerson would provide her audience with her understanding of Creole culture so that they might envision the characters of her songs and street cries in the performance. Depending on the song, Nickerson accompanied her singing performance with the guitar or the piano. At many of her performances, programs offered descriptions or translations of the lyrics to the Creole folksongs and street cries. Nickerson would often include a few Spirituals to illustrate the differences in rhythmic approach and verbal essentials between the music of Anglo-Africans and the Creole ballads.¹⁴¹ Nickerson's performances transported audiences into a soundscape of the Creole peoples of South Louisiana, and were well received.

Beginning in the early 1930s, "The Louisiana Lady" performed at nearly fifty different locations over her thirty-year career, sharing her Creole folk music to audiences ranging from local recitals for music students to the international stage. Not forgetting where she came from, Nickerson often traveled to New Orleans to visit her friends and family and to perform. These performances often took place at Booker T. Washington Auditorium, where they were sponsored by local parent-teacher associations of New Orleans public schools or the B-Sharp Music Club, and historically black universities, such as Dillard and Xavier.¹⁴² Nickerson's ability to make time for performances in her hometown reflected her loyalties and dedication to sharing her gifts with the community that meant so much to her.

Universities across the United States were another influential space where Nickerson would present her Creole folksongs, appealing to an academic and musically inclined crowd.

¹⁴¹ *Washington Post*, June 9, 1949.

¹⁴² "Performances by Camille Lucie Nickerson," CNP, Box 161-4.

Nickerson often performed at Oberlin College, her alma mater, for alumni gatherings and events. Other universities that hosted Nickerson include Stanford University, Mills College, Southern University, Tuskegee Institute, Xavier University of Chicago, and Northwestern University.¹⁴³

Due to her Catholic background, Nickerson took great pride in sharing her Creole folksongs with various Catholic universities. Unlike her performances elsewhere, Nickerson performed free of charge for many Catholic institutions, with the exception of travel expenses.¹⁴⁴ Having grown up in a religious family and actively participated in church music programs, Nickerson professed a nostalgic connection to young Catholic students and those with interest in music. In December 1945, Nickerson performed a lecture-recital for the students of College of St. Mary of the Springs. Following her performance, Father Bauer wrote to Warner Lawson, Dean of the School of Music at Howard University, to applaud Nickerson's authoritative interpretation and sympathetic presentation of the Creole songs in addition to her ability to engage her audience immediately through her revered voice and song.¹⁴⁵ Additional Catholic universities where she performed include Immaculata Junior College, Rosemont College, and Trinity College.¹⁴⁶

As Nickerson's fame spread, opportunities became more frequent for her to perform in front of larger audiences and around the world. On March 5, 1944, the "Louisiana Lady" made her debut at Times Hall in New York City as one of her first major concerts.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Nickerson, "Places where I've been presented," personal note, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

¹⁴⁴ Nickerson to Dean of Rosemont College, letter, February 16, 1965, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 19.

¹⁴⁵ Father Bauer to Warner Lawson, letter, December 12, 1945, CNP Box 161-2, Folder 16.

¹⁴⁶ "Performances by Camille Lucie Nickerson," CNP, Box 161-4.

¹⁴⁷ Camille Nickerson's Times-Hall debut program, March 5, 1944, CNP, Box 161-4, Folder 4.

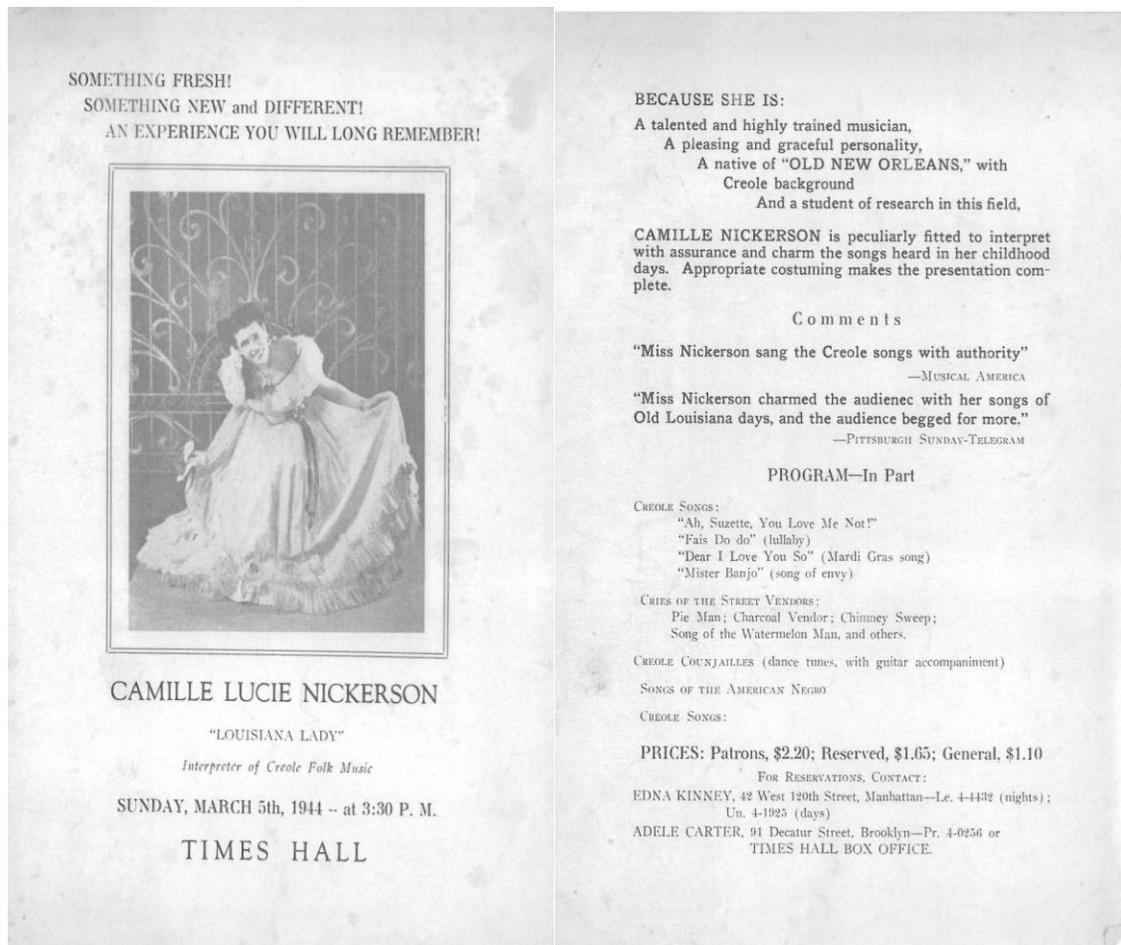


Figure 6. This program, front and back, was used for one of Nickerson’s first professional performances on Sunday, March 5, 1944, at Times Hall in New York City. The commentary and language used to encourage audiences to attend the performance loudly echo Nickerson’s praises. “Performances by Camille Nickerson,” Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-4, Folder 3, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Nickerson also performed in front of large audiences at Kimball Hall in Chicago, Phillips Gallery in Washington, D.C., and Kiel Hall in St. Louis. Nickerson’s success and popularity as a musician, performer, and an interpreter of Creole folksongs was creating the foundation she desired to make the music and existence of Creoles of color known and acknowledged in the accounts of musical history.

Another opportunity to present her Creole music to a wider audience came at the National Folk Festival in St. Louis, Missouri. In April 1953, after years of requesting her presence,

Nickerson appeared at the 19th National Folk Festival held at Kiel Auditorium. As the sesquicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, Nickerson was featured as “The Louisiana Lady,” giving multiple performances and a preferred position on the program. In a report to Howard University’s School of Music, Nickerson praised the festival’s opportunity to give intelligent, interested audiences an exposure to many elements American folk music.¹⁴⁸ She recalled how impressed she was by the meaning of it all:

Here was a lesson in human relations. All had come together in harmony, goodwill, and fellowship, regardless of race, creed or economic background. Each individual or group had been given a place before the audience, and their numbers had been printed on the program. And the spirit of the comradeship really prevailed, for, every night after the last performance they would come together backstage to sing and dance and “make merry” some groups teaching other groups their dances and songs... It is this situation which one invariably finds in any endeavor which has to do with FOLK participation. And this, I believe to be the real meaning of a FOLK Festival.¹⁴⁹

Not only did Nickerson use her platform to share her culture and music, she also enjoyed this opportunity to listen and to appreciate others who were sharing their own cultural and musical histories. Nickerson believed that Creole folk music deserved to be included with these other genres, acknowledged as a distinct musical genre and appreciated at the level of traditional genres.

Nickerson’s reputation as the “Louisiana Lady” opened doors for her to enter the international stage as a performer and cultural liaison. In 1954, Nickerson was sponsored by the Department of Cultural Relations of the American Embassy in Paris and the United States Foreign Service to perform in France. In addition to three radio broadcasts, Nickerson graced the stage fourteen times across France in fourteen cities, including Paris, Lyon, St. Etienne, and

¹⁴⁸ Nickerson, “Report of Visit to St. Louis, MO,” April 1953, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

¹⁴⁹ Nickerson, “Report of Visit to St. Louis, MO,” April 1953, CNP, Box 161-1, Folder 8.

Limoges.¹⁵⁰ Nickerson's performances received excellent reviews from French newspapers and representatives of the American Embassy in Paris and the United States Foreign Service.

Camille Lucie Nickerson

PROGRAM—IN PART

CREOLE SONGS
 "Ai, Suzette" (*Song of unrequited love*)
 "Danse Conni Conne" (*Nursery song*)
 "Dear I Love You So" (*Mardi Gras song*)
 "Mister Banjo" (*Song of Envy*)

CRIS OF THE STREET VENDORS
 The Pie Man; Charcoal Vendor; Chimney Sweep; Watermelon Man, and others.

CREOLE COUNJAILLES (*Guitar accompaniment*)
 Qaamd Mo Te Jeune (*When I was young*)
 Charles Rouseil Embarker (*Charlie Rouseil ran away*)

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO
 I'n So Glad.
 You Dont Know When.

(Entire program given in costume.)

COMMENTS

"Miss Nickerson has an excellent voice for this art, and gave the historically interesting program with grace and charm."
—NEW YORK TIMES.

"Camille Lucie Nickerson presented Creole folk songs—affording one of the most genuinely interesting and refreshing musical interludes to be encountered by critics during any musical season."
—SAN FRANCISCO NEWS.

"Miss Nickerson's musicianship, her charming vocal footnotes, her handling of the patois, and her knowledge of the materials, as shown both in the piano arrangements and her manner of singing, constituted an authoritative resume of this refreshing field of folk music which no one could hear without being both entertained and artistically enriched."
—Hilman Grondahl, THE OREGONIAN, Portland, Ore.

"Like all good folk singers, her style is extremely simple and unaffected—one felt that Miss Nickerson would be an intelligent guide to this world of Afro-Latin culture, and one hopes that she will return to lead us further into it."
—Albert Frankenstein, LOS ANGELES CHRONICLE.

Address: HOWARD UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Fresh from her highly successful tour in the largest cities of France, with memories of enthusiastic applause and most complimentary reviews,

Camille Lucie Nickerson
"Louisiana Lady"

**RETURNS FOR CONCERTS
IN THE UNITED STATES**

COMMENTS

"LIKE EVERY GOOD INTERPRETER of folk music, Miss Nickerson displays a simple style in keeping with the naivete and candor of these folk songs of Louisiana.

"This sympathetic freshness causes her to communicate intensely with her audience, showing a close INNER RELATIONSHIP to this charming country where she was born and reared.

"In this way she keeps alive this musical tradition with sincerity and conviction."

—La Tribune, St. Etienne, France.



CAMILLE LUCIE NICKERSON
in PARIS
Concert at the Cité Universitè

COMMENTS

"Miss Nickerson is definitely a musician with a PERFECT TECHNIQUE, and a RICH VOICE which adapts itself without effort to all the syncopated rhythms of the CREOLE music, and to the PATOIS of the Creole folklore."
—St. Etienne, France

"Miss Nickerson renders the melodies with a PLEASANT TIMBRE in her voice—melodies which she has RETRIEVED FROM THE PAST, and SKILLFULLY HARMONIZED.

"It is extremely moving to see and hear Miss Nickerson who has made it her goal to find and save from extinction the old Creole songs."
Reanne, France

And from the AMERICAN EMBASSY IN PARIS,

"Your presentations and interpretations of Creole Folk Music have met with great interest among the French people. As you know, we try to utilize every means at our disposal to further mutual understanding between France and the United States, and your appearances have been a valuable contribution to this effort."
(Signed)—Laurence Harris
Cultural Attachè, Paris France.

From the UNITED STATES FOREIGN SERVICE,

"Your interpretations of the Creole folk songs of Louisiana have made a valuable contribution to our INFORMATION PROGRAM by reminding local audiences that the United States cherishes its FRENCH TRADITIONS."
(Signed)—Stephen M. Coney
Asst. Public Affairs Officer, U.S.I.S.,
Lyon, France

Figure 7. This undated advertisement presents a biographical excerpt about Camille Nickerson and her performance persona, a program of songs that she will perform, and outstanding reviews from major newspapers across the United States. Note the byline regarding the entire program given in costume. **Figure 8.** Nickerson's fame reached new heights following her 1954 tour in France. The praises of her performance were shared from several cities in France and officers in the American Embassy. "Performances by Camille Nickerson," undated, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-4, Folder 11, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

While the success of her tour may have benefitted relations between France and the United States on a cultural level, Nickerson particularly enjoyed presenting Creole folk music to French audiences unfamiliar with the Creoles of New Orleans, and pointing French traditions

¹⁵⁰ "Camille Lucie Nickerson Returns for Concerts in the United States," undated, CNP, Box 161-4, Folder 11.

developed by the Afro-Creole people of Louisiana. Nickerson's strategic use of costume, song selection, and lecture-recital formatting to establish a personal connection with her audiences continued to bring her success with audiences around the world.

Although Nickerson's performances were an important part of her strategy to circulate Creole folk music and have its history acknowledged, the publication of her arrangements would ensure that future generations would be able to appreciate and share the music through their own performances. Nickerson's arrangements were performed by many famous artists, including the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Margaret Tynes, Lawrence Winters, Mattiwilda Dobbs, Camilla Williams, Roland Hayes, Todd Duncan, and Madame Lillian Evanti.¹⁵¹ Nickerson was pleased with the results that such performances, in addition to her own, brought about a growing interest in Creole culture and folk music.

¹⁵¹ McGinty, "Louisiana Lady," 88.

Table 1. Arrangements by Camille Nickerson

Title (Year of Publication)	Publisher	Style of Arrangement
“When Love is Done” (1914)	Koven Thompson Music Publishing Company	Original composition
“You Don’ Know When” (1939)	W.C. Handy Music Publishing Company	Spiritualistic song arranged for baritone or contralto with piano accompaniment
“Five Creole Songs” (1942) “Chère Mo Lemmé Toi,” “Lizette To Quitté La Plaine,” “Dansé Conni Conné,” “Fais Do Do,” and “Micheu Banjo”	Boston Music Company	Five Creole folksongs harmonized and arranged for solo voice and piano with English translations
“Dear, I Love You So,” “Mister Banjo” (1946) “Go To Sleep” (1948)	Boston Music Company	Three choral arrangements of Creole folksongs
“Gué Gué Solingaie” (1948)	Leeds Music Corporation	Creole lullaby in choral arrangement
“Aurore Pradere,” “Mam’selle ZiZi,” and “Suzanne” (1972)	Sam Fox Music Publishing Company	Three choral arrangements of Creole folksongs
“Christmas Everywhere”	Unpublished	Composed by Nickerson
“The Women of the U.S.A”	Unpublished	Composed by Nickerson
“Interracial Hymn to Brotherhood”	Unpublished	Composed by Nickerson and her colleague, Edwin L. Clarke

Source: Nickerson, “Publication Information,” typed personal letter, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 2. Nickerson, “List of Publications by Camille Nickerson,” typed outline, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 2.

Nickerson’s Legacy

Over the years, the Nickerson remained in close contact with her B-Sharp Music Club family and returned as often as she could to celebrate milestone anniversaries for the organization she founded. These celebrations were popular and frequently given attention in

local newspapers such as the *Times-Picayune* and *Louisiana Weekly*.



Figure 9. On November 25, 1961, the B-Sharp Music Club celebrated its forty-fifth anniversary by honoring Camille Lucie Nickerson and Lucille Levy Hutton, past president and charter member, as guests of honor. The celebration was held at Dillard University. *Louisiana Weekly* microfilm, Louisiana and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. **Figure 10.** On Sunday, February 5, 1967, Nickerson celebrated the B-Sharp Music Club's fiftieth anniversary with fellow members at their annual Carnival recital hosted at Booker T. Washington's Auditorium. Debria Brown, international star and mezzo-contralto, was a guest artist present for the celebration. Nickerson, Camille, persons vertical File, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.

When Nickerson established the B-Sharp Music Club, she surrounded herself with excellent young musicians who would become some of the most important figures in musical pedagogy in New Orleans public schools in the twentieth century. Today, current B-Sharp Music Club President Robert N. Perry III, is a fifth-generation teacher from New Orleans and also a third-generation B-Sharp member. His grandmother, Lillian B. Dunn, served as the B-Sharp Music Club's first vice president, while his mother, Lillian Dunn Perry, and father, Robert N.

Perry II, served as presidents before him.¹⁵² Perry's upbringing within a musical family resembled that of many New Orleans families, including Nickerson, whose grandmother, parents, and siblings were all musically inclined.

According to Perry, being raised within a musical family created a constant environment for learning, encouragement, constructive criticism, and above all, a mindset that music was to be appreciated. Lillian Dunn Perry served as a music consultant for New Orleans public schools for many years, as did B-Sharp Music Club charter member, Lucille Levy Hutton, as one of the first vocal music consultants. These were just a few of the many members who devoted their careers to improving opportunities for young musicians of New Orleans through the B-Sharp Music Club within the public schools as educators and principals. According to Al Kennedy, historian of the New Orleans Public Schools:

The B-Sharp Music Club gave a sense of unity to a key group of African American professional teacher-musicians, providing them with an opportunity to perform as well as benefit from performances by visiting musicians. The B-Sharp membership became an extended cultural, social, and educational network that promoted music in the community and in the schools.¹⁵³

Nickerson ensured that her vision would be in good hands by encouraging her fellow members and students to pursue their own musical goals.

While some aspects of the B-Sharp Music Club have changed over the last century, according to present members, the sense of pride and dedication to music of B-Sharp has not wavered. Although their membership decreased following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the B-Sharp Music Club members still continue to gather together for meetings and seasonal programs.

¹⁵² Robert N. Perry III, interviewed by author, October 5, 2018, Louisiana and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

¹⁵³ Kennedy, 11.

Though smaller than previous years, current membership reflects a balance in male and female members. In the fall of 2016, the B-Sharp Music Club began a year-long celebration of the organization's 100th anniversary with a weekend of performances to honor the late Lillian Dunn Perry, with a newer motto, "Be Cool, Be Smart, B-Sharp!"¹⁵⁴ As the organization that Camille Nickerson founded embarks on a new century, its focus remains to support the musical youth of New Orleans and preserving its vibrant culture in order to share with others.

Conclusion

After thirty-six years of being on the faculty of the School of Music at Howard University, Camille Lucie Nickerson retired in 1962 as professor emerita. Though her official retirement documents from Howard University were filed in May 1959, she was immediately rehired and stayed on at the request of the School of Music until her resignation in 1962.¹⁵⁵ Over the years, Nickerson also kept in contact with her alma mater whose training opened many doors for her, Oberlin College. Nickerson gave various performances at Oberlin and for Pi Kappa Lambda, in addition to providing their alumni publications with accurate information concerning her career and accomplishments. In the December 1962 edition of *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Camille Nickerson is mentioned for her "distinguished contributions to musical culture" as a result of her work in the city of New Orleans and the B-Sharp Music Club.¹⁵⁶

As a reflection of her Creole heritage and dedication to leading her community wherever she resided, Nickerson's career as an educator was not limited to her instructional role in a classroom, but flowed into her leadership roles in community activism and her musical

¹⁵⁴ "The B-Sharp Music Club Honors Mrs. Lillian Dunn Perry," flyer, October 16, 2016, Private Collection of B-Sharp Music Club Archival Materials, Robert N. Perry III.

¹⁵⁵ Lawson to Nickerson, letter, July 29, 1959, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 6. Simpson, 446.

¹⁵⁶ "Correspondence, Oberlin College," letters, brochures, and receipts, CNP, Box 161-3, Folder 18. *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, magazine, December 1962, CNP, Box 161-2, Folder 5.

performances. In all she did, Nickerson devoted her time and passion into educating students and audiences alike through music and cultural representation. When asked which aspect of her career she favored most, Nickerson replied, “the only career that was actually planned was teaching. I have certainly spent most of my time at that, and I followed the desires and example of my father in teaching. Altogether, it was my most satisfying activity. The research and performance were all intertwined.”¹⁵⁷ This satisfaction reflects Nickerson’s altruistic spirit in sharing her heritage and musical talent, but also her encouragement to others to pursue their own musical aspirations and to take pride in their own identity.

On April 27, 1982 at 94 years old, Camille Lucie Nickerson died after battling pneumonia on April 27, 1982 at Howard University Hospital in Washington, D.C. The B-Sharp Music Club held a memorial in her honor on June 27, 1982 at Grace United Methodist Church in New Orleans.¹⁵⁸ In a letter to members of the B-Sharp Music Club, then president, Robert N. Perry, Jr., requested members to extend invitation to their friends to assist in “paying tribute to a person who has given so much to music, particularly Creole music, to the arts, to teaching, and to preservation of our heritage.”¹⁵⁹ By the end of her ninety-four years, Nickerson’s main contribution to musical education and Creole folk music had educated, entertained, and enlightened audiences in New Orleans, Washington D.C., and around the world.

In the winter of 1974, while reflecting on her many years spent performing and arranging Creole folk music, Nickerson said, “After all that I have put into it, I feel gratified somewhat at the results. It was what my father wanted me to do... I was determined that these charming songs

¹⁵⁷ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 88.

¹⁵⁸ “B-Sharp Music Club Tribute to Camille Lucie Nickerson, ‘Louisiana Lady,’ Founder,” program, June 27, 1982, Lucille (Levy) Hutton Papers, Collection 191, Box 17, Folder 4, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹⁵⁹ B-Sharp President to members, letter, June 10, 1982, Collection 30, Box 1, Folder 1, BSMC Records, Amistad.

be heard.”¹⁶⁰ And so they were, as Nickerson ensured through performance and publishing that Creole folk music would be brought to life for new generations to study and enjoy.



Figure 11. In this undated photograph taken of Camille Nickerson, her relaxed demeanor and apparel portray Nickerson in a different light than the costumed “Louisiana Lady.” After years of crinoline and combed-back hair, Nickerson remained dedicated to her humble roots as a musician and educator, as her father did before her. “Photographs of Camille Nickerson,” undated, Camille Nickerson Papers, Box 161-14, Folder 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹⁶⁰ McGinty, “Louisiana Lady,” 88.

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