

On Picayune Butler, T. A. Brown, George Nichols, T. D, Rice and “Jim Crow”

April 6, 2015 (slightly edited for typos 9/8/2019) By Tony Thomas

There is little creditable evidence about a Black banjoist named Picayune Butler who may have lived in New Orleans. I suspect there was a Picayune Butler who was a black banjoist in New Orleans, but not as the legend inflated around him by blackface entertainers in circuses and later in minstrel shows around the song "Picayune Butler is Coming to Town." However, the evidence is so slim that it is quite possible he was simply a creation of 19th century popular culture. If Butler did live, he was probably not around by the mid-1830s. He had no known relationship with the origins of the song “Jim Crow” and its transmission to blackface minstrels. Very much of what is written about him, except a page in Lowell Schreyer’s *The Banjo Entertainers* is completely wrong.

A series of white blackface performers inhabited the role of "Picayune Butler" in circuses and minstrel shows from the 1830s into the late 19th century. In addition, a number of people in public life with the last name Butler acquired the nickname "Picayune Butler" due to the popularity of the Picayune Butler song, and especially its identification on one hand with the Democratic party that used it as a campaign song in the 1840s, and, on the other hand, because the nickname and the song were used as negative markers of association with Black people.

John Butler, a white player from upstate New York was acclaimed as one of the best

minstrel banjoists of the 1850s and 1860s. From the early 1850s Butler belonged to several major minstrel companies working out of New York City that toured the national minstrel circuit and one that even traveled to Cuba around 1860. This Butler was the author of several complicated and highly developed banjo pieces published in the 1850s with Picayune Butler in the title. Butler was one of a series of banjo entertainers in this period who tried to break out of the confines of minstrel troupes by performing as a solo act in concert saloons (an early precursor of vaudeville) as a single act and by participating in a big time banjo contests in New York and Chicago and possibly other cities. This John Butler was the "Pic Butler" Converse refers to in his memoirs and was white. Unfortunately, in the 20th Century music, drama, and banjo historians started confusing this John Butler, probably born in the 1820s in New York State and died in 1864, with the Black Picayune Butler referred to in the Picayune Butler song.

Most claims about Picayune Butler by 20th Century music historians and folklorists are based a paragraph or two written by T. Allison Brown, a former stage hand who wrote for and eventually edited *The Clipper* in the Mid-19th century before becoming a theater promotor and theatrical manager. First published in an article written in 1860, it was relentlessly repackaged, reprinted, and plagiarized throughout the 19th and early 20th century in articles and in a book, and then reproduced in the 1970s in several journals and books on minstrel history. Here it is:

George Nichols, the clown, attached many years to Purdy Brown’s Theatre and Circus of the South and West.... first sang ““Jim Crow”” as clown in 1834, afterwards as a Negro.

He first conceived the idea from a French darkie, a banjo player, known from New Orleans to Cincinnati as Picayune Butler—a copper colored gentleman, who gathered many a picayune by singing “Picayune Butler is Going Away,” Accompanying himself on his four- stringed banjo.

Brown is renown among critics and historians of theater history for his complete inaccuracy and ignorance. One example is University of Pennsylvania professor, Poe biographer, and historian of American drama Arthur Hobson Quinn’s review of George C. D. Odell’s *Annals of the New York Stage* . Quinn wrote that Odell did not need to explain the “differences of dates” Odell’s research discovered from the dates in T. Allston Brown’s *History of the New York Stage*. Quinn wrote:” I wonder whether this is really necessary. Anyone who has worked through Brown’s irritating volumes, which seem to have been proofread by a blind man, will not hesitate for a moment as to which record to trust,” (*American Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Nov., 1938) p. 364).

Brown claims Picayune Butler was as a "yellow," "French" [meaning from Haiti, Martinique, or Guadeloupe but possibly a Louisiana Creole] Black person who had busked in New Orleans. His claim Butler was known in the Mississippi valley up to Cincinnati, coincides with an allusion T. D. Rice made to Butler in May 1830.

Everything else Brown then says is patently wrong. Some of it must have seemed

wrong to many people in 1860s, signaling Brown’s lack of familiarity with the Picayune Butler, minstrelsy, and “Jim Crow”. Much of the rest is contradicted by the information about T.D. Rice and George Nichols now available.

For example, Brown claims that the song associated with Picayune Butler is "Picayune Butler's Going Away," but no one else has ever heard of any reference to a song with that title at any time, at any place. The Picayune Butler song is always "Picayune Butler's Coming to Town" no matter what the other variants are. As the song was a fairly popular minstrel tune that Brown could have heard performed at several venues any night of the week in NYC in 1859-60 or bought in sheet music or songsters, this speaks to his lack of real familiarity or claim to expertise.

Brown says that the song “Jim Crow” was first made a hit by one George Nichols, a circus clown, in 1834. He also says Nichols learned the song from Picayune Butler in New Orleans. Brown makes no mention of T.D. Rice's association with the song even though Rice became an international celebrity for his performances of the song. Rice had been performing the song on the national circuit with sell-out performances in major theaters in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia by 1832. Given that Rice’s success with “Jim Crow” in the 1830s was a major international development in blackface entertainment across the 1830s and 1840s, this also speaks to Brown's lack of familiarity with the whole issue.

It is unfortunate that 20th and 21st century music historians and folklorists before Lowell

Schreyer and myself did not look at Brown’s obvious errors on these basic questions to interrogate the rest of Brown’s account. Brown's quotation was seized upon by scholars who disregarded the obvious inaccuracy on the date of the song “Jim Crow” or the title of the Picayune Butler song to accept Brown at good coin and construct narratives in which Nichols journeyed to New Orleans and learned the “Jim Crow” song from Butler and then taught the song to Rice, or even to construct narratives in which both Rice and Nichols journey to New Orleans to do this.

However, accounts of Nichols and Rice’s whereabouts from 1828 to 1831 and their performances of Jim Crow show a different story. Rice originated his “Jim Crow” song and dance in late 1829 or early 1830. It was a hit in Louisville where he first performed it by May 1830. After further success with the song in the Ohio Valley, Rice joined Purdy Brown’s Circus for a month or two in the fall of 1830 where he undoubtedly headlined with his “Jim Crow” song and dance. He then joined a theatrical company that eventually took his performance of “Jim Crow” to national audiences in the Eastern United States. There is no record of Nichols performing the song until March 1831 when Nichols is recorded performing “Jim Crow” in a circus in New Orleans, about one year after T.D. Rice began performing the song. He was probably replacing Rice who had probably made a hit performing the song and dance in the same circus.

It is rather impressive how close an actual chronology we have on Rice's performances of the song and even where Nichols was to contradict this. Mid-19th century people must have been deeply interested in the most obscure stage performers and their travels because a whole series of memoirs of actors, theater directors, and other performers were published from the

1840s on that provide a very accurate picture of where Rice was and even where Nichols was during the pertinent period. Moreover, our current ease of access to newspaper accounts of both Rice and Nichols in the 1830s has given us rather a rather accurate picture of this real chronology. Brown can be excused for not knowing this information, but there can be no accurate scholarship on this issue without reference to these facts.

“Jim Crow” was a very common African New World folk song, found particularly in coastal areas from the Carolinas to Florida, and closely aligned to similar songs known in the English-speaking Caribbean. Traces of it are muddled up by the fact that T.D. Rice made it the most popular song of the 1830s in the English-speaking world and its popularity continued in minstrel and other show business performances for nearly a century afterward. Like many songs made popular by European American popular music with an African American origin and/or with an African American musical structure white blackface and popular performances probably expanded the song's range among African Americans, although there is good scholarship of the persistence of the song in its original Black context as an animal dance into the 1950s. Rice could have learned from African Americans in New York, Florida, Alabama, or as Rice claimed later in Louisville or Pittsburgh.

Rice was a carpenter and an aspiring actor and dancer from the New York area although until his success with “Jim Crow” in early 1830, he was more valued in stage companies for his skill at making sets. He left New York with a stage company toward the end of 1828 en route to Alabama. He seems to have briefly left that company to perform in Florida in March 1829. When that company broke up, he ended up performing in Alabama across the summer of 1829.

He joined a company in that traveled to Louisville and Cincinnati by the late fall of 1829. At least one performer touring with that company wrote that in late 1829 and early 1830 Rice was already practicing but not performing his “Jim Crow” song and dance. All the reports of Rice's performances from Louisville to London across the 1830s point to his dancing, not his singing as the key to Rice's “Jim Crow” success.

There is absolutely no evidence that Rice or Nichols had been to New Orleans at this point. Likewise, there is absolutely no evidence Rice had met Nichols before the fall of 1830. A reasons for the shifts in location and the breakup of the theatre company Rice traveled to the South with was that its plan to merge with Purdy Brown's Circus where Nichols performed did not happen. Nichols and Rice never performed together and were probably never in the same place until Rice joined Purdy Brown's Circus in the fall of 1830. There is also no record of Rice getting to New Orleans before 1834 or of Nichols getting there before 1831.

Rice began performing the "Jim Crow" song and dance in a play in Louisville probably in March or April 1830. By May 1830 Rice's success with the song was so great that Rice was extracted from the show, and performed the “Jim Crow” song and dance as a separate act, concocting a number of different versions of “Jim Crow” for his farewell (to Louisville) benefit in late May 1830 when the company went on the road to other places in the Ohio Valley where he met with continued success. In his May 1830 Louisville performances, Rice apparently (we know this from theater bills to promote future performances, not from an account of the performances) attributed different versions of the song to fictitious

authors, such as "a poet of the town," and one about New Orleans to "Picayune Butler of New Orleans." Curiously, Rice attributed only the words and not the music of this version to Butler, even though he had no such restriction in his other fictitious attributions. Though Rice often attributed his songs and dance to real or fictitious African American sources, he never ever attributed any version of "Jim Crow" to Butler again.

In the summer of 1830 Rice seems to have wanted to exploit his success with “Jim Crow” to obtain bigger billing, go out as a solo act, and make more money than he was making in the theater company he participated in. When these attempts proved unsuccessful, Rice joined Purdy Brown's Circus of the West in the fall of 1830. George Nichols was a member of this company at the time. Since Rice had been a massive success with his “Jim Crow” song and dance in the Ohio Valley, he no doubt headlined with his “Jim Crow” song and dance. After a month or two, Rice left Purdy Brown's circus to join a theater company that was headed east to eventually begin his big success performing “Jim Crow” in major venues in Philadelphia and New York to become a national and then an international sensation.

Henry Kmen in *Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years 1791–1848* (1966) and W. T. Lhamon in *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (2003) speculate that Nichol's performances in New Orleans must have been in 1830 to make T. A. Brown's quotation make sense. However, the problem is that Nichols' performances were in March 1831. The performances were with the same circus where Rice had no doubt successfully performed the song and dance a few months previously. Nichols was probably replacing Rice who had left that circus for bigger and better things. When I explained this all the Lhamon, he admitted he was wrong about all this.

To reprise: Rice learned ““Jim Crow”,” probably from African American sources sometime before late 1829 or early 1830. He began making a hit with the song in March or April 1830. By the end of May 1830 he had become a major star in the Ohio Valley performing his song and dance. There is no sign he had ever been to New Orleans or met Nichols until the fall of 1830 when he and Nichols briefly worked in a circus where Rice was performing the song. Nichols did not perform the song in New Orleans until March 1831, a year after Rice's first performances.

Blackface performers and other white performers of Black material in the antebellum period often attributed their songs to black performers real and imagined like Chief Gumbo Chaff. They did this even for songs we know are English, Irish, or Scots folk and popular songs or new songs they wrote after the model of 19th century European or North American popular music. If Nichols attributed “Jim Crow” to Picayune Butler, the subject of an enormously popular minstrel song, someone regularly portrayed as a character by blackface performers in the circuses Nichols worked in in the 1830s, Nichols was only following the stock pattern. It would have hardly fit into the claims of authenticity antebellum blackface performers followed to attribute the song to T.D. Rice. Rice certainly followed suit telling several different probably invented stories of learning ““Jim Crow”” from humble blacks.

However, it is interesting that there is absolutely no record of Rice claiming the song that made him an international celebrity was learned from Picayune Butler. Like many blackface

entertainers of his era, Rice directly attributed his work to African Americans. Quite notably in 1834 when he finally did play New Orleans, Rice did an entire show as a tribute to the Black Banjoist "Old Corn Meal," who did exist, dressing like Corn Meal was reputed to dress. Yet, there is absolutely no record that Rice made any similar tribute or mention of Picayune Butler in New Orleans or anywhere else. If he had learned the song that had already made him a national star from Picayune Butler of New Orleans or if he had discovered the song from Nichols and had been told the song came from Butler, it would stand to reason that in New Orleans and elsewhere he would have paid even greater tribute to Picayune Butler. However, he did not.

A second issue involved is the reference to "an ole gourd banjo" in Phil Rice's mid-1850s banjo tutor's version of the Picayune Butler song. I have scoured sheet music collections, antebellum song books, and songsters for versions of the Picayune Butler song. Phil Rice's version is the only one that mentions "an ole gourd banjo." Many other versions including versions of the tune published more than a decade before Rice's do not mention any sort of banjo whatsoever. No one has presented any information that privileges Rice's version as the chief version, the most performed version, or that Rice has any sort of claim of knowledge of Picayune Butler beyond what anyone else had. Since he was writing a banjo method book, he was probably more inclined to know of the early gourd banjo prehistory of the frame head banjo than others, but there is no reason to believe that this means more than that.

To be sure, the resonance of the Pic Butler song, a fairly popular song throughout the

English-speaking world from the 1840s to the late 19th century expresses the recollection of 1840s and 1850s white American devotees of minstrelsy for the original African American gourd banjoists, although post-Civil War white folk versions often diverge entirely from the antebellum versions of a Black banjoist). Certainly, the musical structure of the Picayune Butler song suggests that the tune, at least, had African American origins. However, there is absolutely no proof that the song was originated by Butler if he existed, especially insofar as it speaks of him in the third person, and typically contains a set of the standard racist images of slavery and Black people common to minstrel songs of the period, but rarely found in African American folk music.

These are the pertinent facts about Butler, the gourd banjo, and “Jim Crow” that I have uncovered in my research. There are other issues that arose out the discussion where my research is still ongoing, namely why it would have been impossible for an African American to have performed in antebellum blackface minstrelsy as some who have confused John Butler with Picayune Butler have written and the related question of the place of antebellum minstrelsy in the political, ideological, and racial realities of antebellum America, especially in Northern cities like New York and Philadelphia where it was centered. There is also the issue why 20th and 21st century music historians, banjo enthusiasts, and folklorists could concoct a false legend of Picayune Butler that no 19th century person could have believed, and why so much credence would be given to an obviously wrong statement by T. Allison Brown who has been long known for his unreliability.