

Joseph Hunter Dickinson – A Cranfordite worth Knowing

By Vic Bary

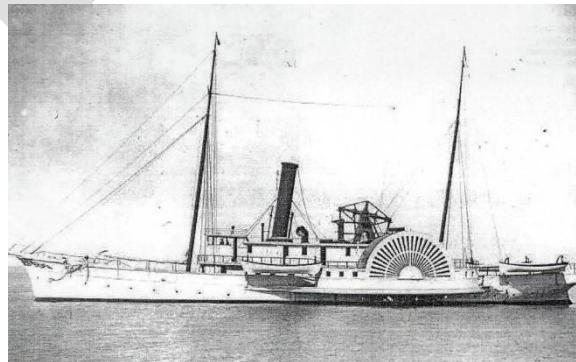


Joseph H. Dickinson.

Last March, Steven Glazer gave CHS a research file he had compiled on Joseph H. Dickinson, an African-American inventor and craftsman who lived in Cranford from 1902 to 1920. I have to admit I had never heard of him, but after reading the files on this holder of 33 patents for organs, pianos and phonographs, I thought he was worth sharing with the CHS membership.

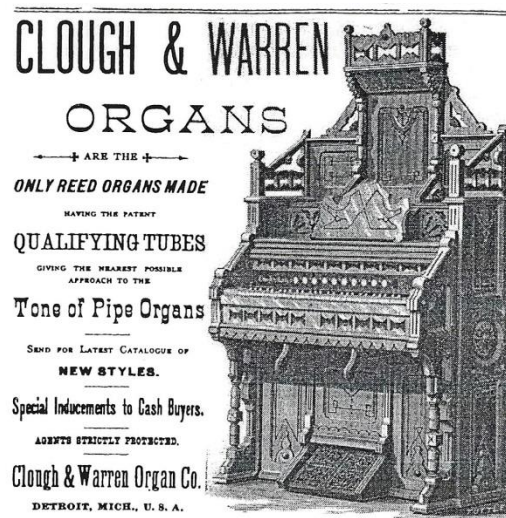
The Detroit Years – Clough & Warren

Joseph Hunter Dickinson was born on June 22, 1855 while his Virginia-born parents - Samuel and Jane - were in Canada. A year later they were living in Detroit where Joseph would attend school and grow up. In 1870, at age 15, he joined the US Revenue Service (precursor of the US Coast Guard) and served two years aboard the cutter “Fessenden”.



Cutter “Fessenden”

Upon returning to Detroit (where he would reside 1872 – 1901, and is generally listed in city directories as “colored”), Dickinson went to work for the Clough & Warren Organ Company, one of the largest organ makers in the world. Purchasers of their instruments included Queen Victoria and the royal family of Portugal. Their “Vocalion” instrument was the leading church organ for many years.

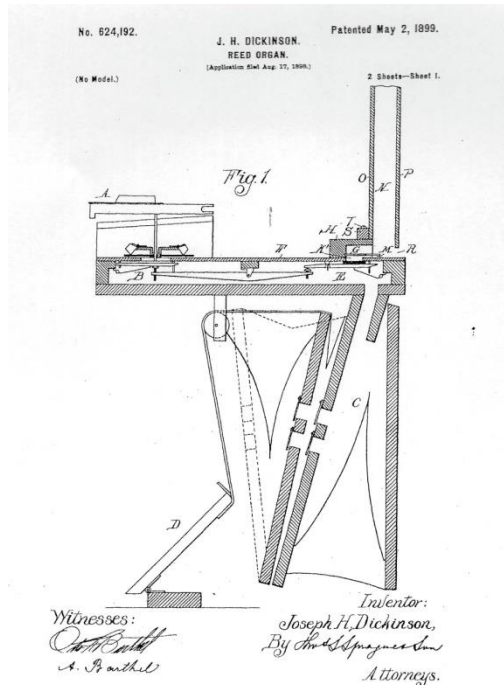


CLOUGH & WARREN
ORGANS
— ARE THE —
ONLY REED ORGANS MADE
HAVING THE PATENT
QUALIFYING TUBES
GIVING THE NEAREST POSSIBLE
APPROACH TO THE
Tone of Pipe Organs
SEND FOR LATEST CATALOGUE OF
NEW STYLES.
Special Inducements to Cash Buyers.
AGENTS STRICTLY PROTECTED.
Clough & Warren Organ Co.
DETROIT, MICH., U. S. A.

Clough & Warren Ad

It was while at Clough & Warren that Dickinson learned his craft and began designing improvements to organs and pianolas (a piano that played music from a punched paper roll, but unlike a player piano, could also be played like a piano). One of the organs Dickinson help design was sent to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition where it won a prize.

Joseph Dickinson filed his first patent (# 624,192) while at Clough & Warren in August, 1898, and would file his last (# 1,808,808 for a music roll magazine) while living in Larchmont, NY in October, 1928. The great bulk of his patents (19) would be filed while he was employed by the Aeolian Company in Garwood. He would assign eleven more patents to them while later living in Larchmont.



First Patent #624,192 – filed 1898

In 1880 Dickinson married African-American Eva Gould. Two years later (1882) he left Clough & Warren to form a partnership with his father-in-law, the Dickinson-Gould Organ Company, manufacturer of parlor and chapel organs. They sent an example of their work to the 1884 New Orleans Exhibition as part of an exhibit on the accomplishments of African-Americans. In 1886, Dickinson sold his interest in the partnership back to his father-in-law and returned to Clough & Warren as superintendent for the building of higher grade organs.

Dickinson also served as a state representative from the first district of Wayne County (Detroit) during the 1897-1898 and 1899-1900 sessions.

The Cranford Years

Joseph H. Dickinson first appears in the 1902 Cranford City Directory where he is shown as working for the Aeolian Company and residing on Aeolian Avenue (renamed Spruce Street by 1907), Cranford. The area bounded on the northwest by Brookside Place, the northeast by Spruce Street, the southeast by West End Place, and the northwest by Orchard Avenue was developed in 1901 by the Aeolian Company of Garwood as a worker's housing development known as "Aeolian Park". Joseph and his sons Joseph W. and Samuel would work for the better part of two decades for the Aeolian Company, a major manufacturer of parlor and church organs as well as pianolas.

The Metrostyle Pianola
Realizes Perfection in a Piano Player.



THE PIANOLA enables anyone to play the piano. The Metrostyle Pianola does this, and also shows exactly how it should be played.

Every roll prepared for the Metrostyle Pianola has on it, in a simple and easily followed form, a complete indication of just how a musician has actually interpreted the composition. As far as possible these interpretations are by the composers themselves, or the greatest living exponent of a composer. Paderewski, Busch, Paur, Hofmann, Moszkowski, Carrara, and Chamade, are among those who have interpreted music for the Metrostyle Pianola.

The interpretations upon the rolls are not arbitrary, each performer being at liberty to exercise individuality in following them. Viewed from whatever standpoint—as an instrument, purely for pleasure, as a novel and wonderfully effective method of acquiring a musical education, or as a means for preserving the interpretations of the masters of the piano—the Metrostyle Pianola is without question one of the most important and far-reaching inventions in musical history.

Naturally, from its character, the Metrostyle Pianola appeals to both the musician and the untrained music lover, and is an instrument to every owner of a piano.

Pianola, \$250; Pianola with Metrostyle, \$300.
Purchasable by Moderate Monthly Payments.

The Aeolian Co., 362 Fifth Ave.
Selling Agents: Frederick Loesz & Co., Brooklyn.
Lester & Co., Newark.

Aeolian Company Pianola Ad

The brothers would also file several patents in their own names, separately or jointly.

The Dickinsons would be shown as residing on Aeolian Avenue (renamed Spruce Street by 1907) 1902 - 1905, Aeolian Court (probably an error as there was no Aeolian Court, only Aeolian Avenue) 1906, and at 1 Spruce Street 1907-1910 (the renamed Aeolian Avenue). By 1911, Samuel is shown as residing at 232 West North Avenue. Joseph, father and son, continued to reside at 1 Spruce Street or 1 Beech Street (Beech Street was Pianola Avenue before 1907).

The brothers seem to have later struck out on their own, as the May 13, 1915 *Cranford Chronicle* carries an ad for Dickinson Brothers – Manufacturers of Pianos and Player Pianos.

DICKINSON BROS.
MFRS. OF
PIANOS AND PLAYER PIANOS
Direct from Factory to Purchaser
SOLD ON EASY TERMS
Pianos \$150 up Player Pianos \$300 up
J. W. DICKINSON S. L. DICKINSON
1 Beech St 232 W. North Ave.
CRANFORD, N. J.

Dickinson Bros. Ad 1915

Evidently, the business met with some success, as starting in 1915, the local newspapers carried stories about Joseph W. Dickson successfully competing on the East Coast in automobile races driving his 110 HP (a lot of horsepower in 1915) “Stutz Special”. The Stutz Company of Indianapolis was the manufacturer of very powerful, expensive automobiles which enjoyed great racing success at the hands of company drivers and in the hands of privateers like Dickinson.



Racing Stutz

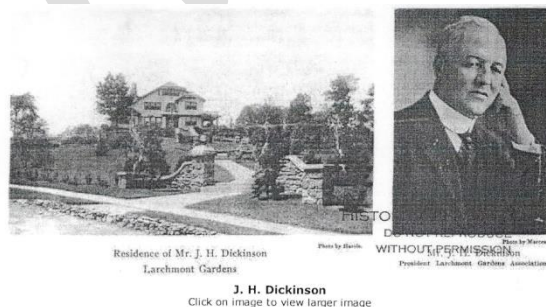
Sadly, while racing at the Mount Holly Fair on September 19, 1920, Joseph's car struck a pole and both he and his mechanic were thrown out of it – the mechanic to the side of the track, but Joseph onto the track where he was struck and killed by another driver. He is interred at Fairview Cemetery, Westfield.

The Larchmont Years

In his later years at Aeolian, Joseph H. Dickinson had climbed to the position of superintendent of the company's experimental division. Although he filed one patent from Larchmont, New York in 1916, he is carried in Cranford City Directories through 1920 at 1 Spruce Street.

He would file all further patents from 1918 until his last (in 1928) from Larchmont. Interestingly, he doesn't seem to have severed his relationship with Aeolian. His last eleven patents were all assigned to the Aeolian Company of Connecticut

Dickinson seems to have been quite prosperous by the time he relocated to Larchmont. A *Larchmont Times* September 28, 1922 special section entitled "Larchmont the Beautiful" contains these photos of Dickinson and his mansion and identifies him as President of Larchmont Gardens.



The 1930 U.S. Census shows Joseph H. Dickinson (age 74), born in Canada and married to Eva Jane (age 67) living at 72 Briarcliff Road in Larchmont (Westchester County) New York. His home, which he owns, is valued at \$65,000. (The 6,100 square foot home built in 1907 still stands and is estimated to have a market value of \$2.4 million.)

He is identified as a naturalized citizen and he and his wife are identified as WHITE, as was recorded in the 1910 US Census when he was living in Cranford. A strange circumstance for an individual lionized in several volumes about notable African-Americans, perhaps based on a misassumptions made by the Census enumerators conducting the interviews.

While there is no evidence that the Dickinsons were trying to “pass”, being perceived as White must have smoothed the way for his admission into Westchester County polite society.

Joseph Hunter Dickinson died Wednesday June 3, 1936 at his home in Larchmont at age 81. The obituary said he had resided there for 19 years (since 1917). He was survived by his wife and his son, Samuel. He was interred at Fairview Cemetery, Westfield, New Jersey (where his son Joseph W. was buried).

Sources:

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2. Cranford City Directories, various
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4. *Cranford Chronicle*, various
5. INVENT: An African American Curriculum, “Musical Instruments- J. H. Dickinson
6. Obituary Joseph H. Dickinson, *Larchmont Times*, June 4, 1936, page 3
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8. Stearns, J. S. (Secretary of State), Michigan Legislative Manual and Official Directory for the Years 1899-1900, Robert Smith Printing Co., State Printers and Binders, Lansing, MI, 1899
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10. U.S. Census 1910 and 1930
11. [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeolian_Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeolian_Company)