

Why Is the South Known as “Dixie”?

The answer may surprise you.

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In 1859, the musician and performer Daniel Decatur Emmett composed “Dixie,” a minstrel song that included the now-famous refrain “Away, away, away down south in Dixie!” The song was a smash hit in its day—[Abraham Lincoln](#) called it “one of the best tunes I have ever heard”—and it later became the de facto national anthem of the Confederacy during the [Civil War](#). Emmett’s ditty is now generally credited with popularizing “Dixie” as a nickname for the southern states, but he never claimed to have coined the word itself. In fact, there are at least three competing theories for how the term originated.

The most straightforward explanation for the South-Dixie connection concerns the [Mason and Dixon Line](#), a boundary between [Pennsylvania](#) and [Maryland](#) that was drawn in 1767 by English surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. The line was originally crafted to settle a border dispute between the two colonies, but it later became an informal demarcation point between the southern slave states and the free states to the north. With this in mind, it’s likely that “Dixie” and “Dixieland” first emerged as slang terms to refer to the territory south of Jeremiah Dixon’s boundary line.

Yet another theory traces Dixie’s roots to [Louisiana](#). In the years before the Civil War, the state’s Citizens’ Bank of [New Orleans](#) issued ten-dollar notes with “dix”—the French word for “ten”—written on one side. The widely circulated bills became known as “Dixies,” and some argue the term was later appropriated as a geographical nickname, first for New Orleans and Louisiana and then for the entire South.

A third common explanation of Dixie’s origins involves a [Manhattan](#) plantation owner named “Dix” (or perhaps “Dixy”) who had a reputation for being especially kind to his enslaved workers. As the story goes, when the enslaved workers were later sold and sent to the South, they spoke fondly of their former home in “Dixie’s Land,” and the term then entered the vernacular as shorthand for a peaceful plantation. Accounts of the “Dix” explanation date back as far as the 1860s, but many historians now dismiss it as a myth.