

Square Piano built by

Robert and William Nunns, New York City

Serial number 598, built 1828

Frame: wood
Action: English square action
Hammers of leather and felt layers
Overdampers
Pedals; one, damper lift
Range: FF – c4 (68 notes)
Stringing: double throughout
FF – D copper wound on iron wire
D# - c4 iron wire
Case: Mahogany and mahogany veneer
Rosewood trim
Rosewood and Pearwood banding
Restored and refinished

The Nunns family emigrated from London, England in 1821 and established a piano factory at 96 Broadway in New York City. Soon the firm was a principal builder of pianos in the city, later becoming known as Nunns and Clark. It was here that William Steinweg received his introduction to American piano building and who in 1853 became one of the founders of the Steinway Piano Company. In fact, the Steinway family bought the workshops of Nunns and Clark, thus this piano was built in the same location as the early Steinways of NYC.

The square piano was a hot item in the 1800's. Developed from the clavichord frame and having its roots in northern Germany and further developed in London England, the "square" piano was less expensive to build and easier to move than the other popular piano style derived from the harpsichord. Squares outsold the "grand piano" nine to one. Square pianos were built between 1740 and 1890 when the upright piano gained favour and replaced it in the marketplace for use in the home. In comparison to the grand piano, the square and in later years the upright placed greater emphasis on cabinet work than quality of sound production. Due to inherent structural deficiencies, square pianos were difficult to maintain, so very few are now found in good playing condition.

This example has no metal framing, a feature added in squares built after 1840 allowing for greater stability and increased string tension. As the 1800's progressed, this type of piano became bigger and louder, but not necessarily better, until in the 1880's manufacturers in the USA, the last country to build squares, decided to abandon this line in favour of the upright.

