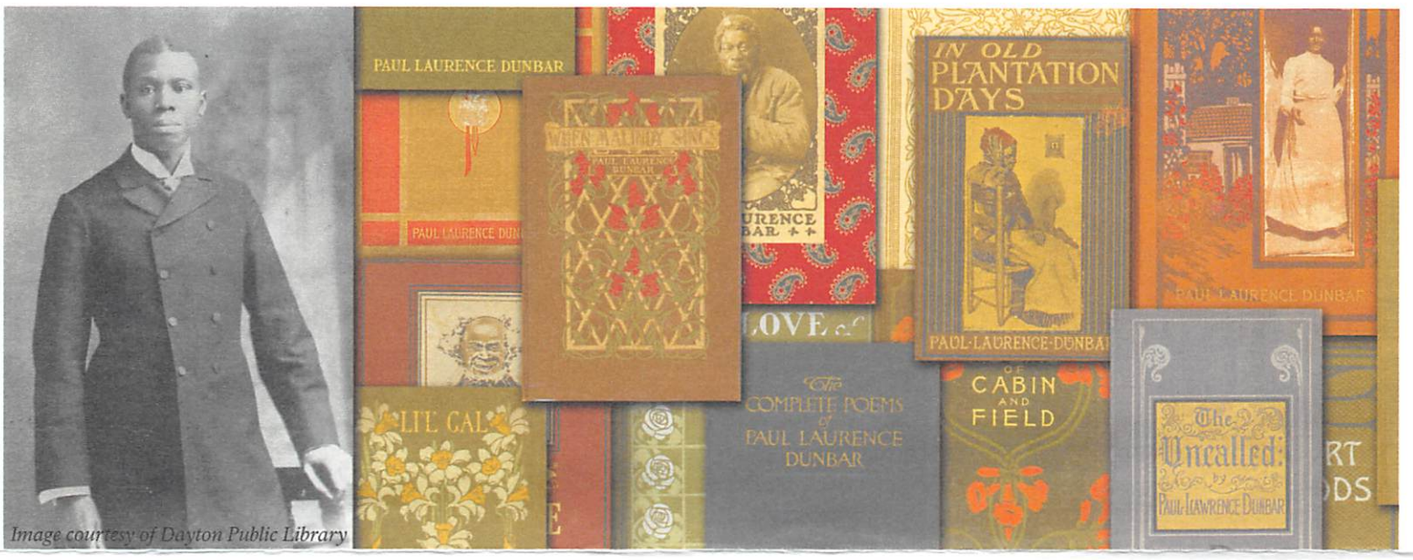
Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial



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Paul Laurence Dunbar (June 27, 1872 – February 9, 1906) was an American poet and author who was best known in his lifetime for his dialect work and his use of metaphor and rhetoric, often in a conversational style. In his short career he produced an impressive twelve books of poetry, four novels, four books of short stories, and wrote the lyrics to many popular songs. Dunbar became the first African American to support himself financially through his writing.

"The child within the cradle rail..."

Paul was born in Dayton, Ohio. His mother Matilda and his father Joshua were former slaves from Kentucky. Joshua Dunbar served in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry and the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry of the United States Colored Troops during the American Civil War.

Paul had two half brothers, William and Robert, sons of Matilda from a previous marriage in Kentucky. Matilda and Joshua had a second child, a daughter named Elizabeth, who passed away in infancy due to malnutrition. Matilda had high aspirations for Paul. She taught him to read when he was four years old, and often supplied him with books of short stories and poetry. Paul was a popular speaker in high school, gaining the nickname "Deacon Dunbar" for his authoritative style of speech.

Pneumonia prevented Paul from getting his diploma on time, but he persevered and it was during this time that he wrote the poem "Keep a Pluggin' a Way." High school was a productive time for Dunbar. He was editor of the school newspaper and was a classmate of Orville Wright. The Wright brothers later printed the *Dayton Tattler*, a short-lived newspaper directed at Dayton's black community and edited by Dunbar.

"The poet and his song.."

As the child of former slaves, Dunbar grew up listening to a wealth of stories about African American life and culture. He was fascinated by the sounds of words and the way they went together, and began creating rhyming verse as early as age six. At the age of 13, Paul composed and recited a verse for an Easter celebration at the Eaker Street African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Dunbar energetically pursued the sale of his poems and stories to local newspapers such as the *Dayton Herald*, though he could not cross the color barrier to work for a newspaper as a journalist. His first published story, "The Tenderfoot," (1891) was purchased by the A.N. Kellogg syndicate for six dollars.

The next year, Dunbar was invited by a former teacher to perform his first public reading at a meeting of the Western Association of Writers in Dayton. Poet James Newton Matthews heard Dunbar and gave him high praise in an article published in Midwestern newspapers.

Dunbar was invited to recite at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where he became acquainted with Frederick Douglass. While working as a waiter in Chicago during the fair, Paul overheard the phrase "jump back, honey, jump back" and incorporated it into his famous poem "A Negro Love Song," known for its mood-evoking staccato delivery and syncopated rhythm.

"Of wealth, of fame, of sure success.."

The United Brethren Publishing House in Dayton printed Dunbar's first book, *Oak and Ivy*, in 1893. Dunbar could not afford to pay the $125 cost of printing on his $4 weekly pay as an elevator operator, so he worked out a deal to pay the printing costs by selling his book by hand for one dollar per copy.

Dunbar was so persistent in the sale of his book that it eventually made its way into the hands of some generous supporters. Attorney Charles A. Thatcher and psychiatrist Henry A. Tobey sponsored Dunbar, funding his second book *Majors and Minors* (1895). Dunbar's career reached new heights when the famed novelist and literary critic William Dean Howells favorably reviewed *Majors*

and Minors in Harper's Weekly.

Howells' glowing review gave Dunbar the exposure he needed to reach a larger audience. Public requests for anything by Dunbar in print soared to the extent, that Dodd, Mead and Company published *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors* together as *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896).

Amid the great demand for his writing, Dunbar embarked on a steamer for a six-month literary tour of England. On the eve of his departure, he met poet and author Alice Ruth Moore. They had long been acquaintances through correspondence, but by the end of the evening they were engaged to be married.

"All dat loved me an' dat I loved in the past.."

Alice was a notable poet in her own right, having just published her first collection of short stories and poetry in 1895. The *Monthly Review* published her *Violets and Other Tales* while she was a teacher in the New Orleans school system. Soon afterwards she published *The Goodness of St. Rocque and other Stories*.

She had only recently moved to New York to help found the White Rose Mission, a home for girls, when she became engaged to Paul. After he returned from England, the couple married on March 6, 1898. Disease, though, soon dominated Paul's life, as he discovered that he had tuberculosis, an infection for which no cure existed.

Paul was advised to leave Washington and move to a drier climate because of his illness. He and Alice moved to Colorado. By 1902 their marriage had been irreparably damaged by the strain of Paul's speaking tours, coupled with his failing health and the alcohol that comforted and exacerbated his condition.

"When death does come a-callin'.."

Dunbar struggled throughout his career because he was primarily known for his dialect work, even though he published poetry in standard English alongside that of dialect. His dialect poetry and stories were more popular and subsequently more marketable. This became increasingly apparent as Dunbar published his novels. Most were not received well by critics and the public, although *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), the last of his four novels, was moderately successful.

After Paul and Matilda seperated he returned to Dayton, where in 1904 he purchased a home for himself and his mother, placing it in her name. It was there that Paul spent the final years of his life writing until he could no longer write, crafting new poems and pouring over correspondence ranging from U.S. presidents to supporters he met along his travels. Throughout his life Dunbar spoke out against racial inequality and his final years were spent with renewed effort, utilizing the power of his pen to call for social change.

On February 9, 1906, Dunbar died of complications arising from tuberculosis. He was 33 years old.

"Oh, tell me, loved one, would my memory stay?.."

Dunbar wrote many of his works while living in Dayton. Several of his later works were produced in the home he bought in 1904. After his death in 1906, Matilda Dunbar maintained the house until it became a state memorial in 1938, the first in the nation that was dedicated to an African America.

In 1962 the U.S. Department of the Interior declared the Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial a National Historic Landmark. The National Park Service listed the surrounding Dunbar Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

Major Works

Collections of Poetry:

- *Oak and Ivy*
- *Majors and Minors*
- *Lyrics of Lowly Life*
- *Lyrics of the Hearthside*
- *Poems of Cabin and Field*
- *Candle-Lightin' Time*
- *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*
- *When Malindy Sings*
- *Li'l' Gal*
- *Chris'mus is a-Comin' and Other Poems*
- *Howdy, Honey, Howdy*
- *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*
- *A Plantation Portrait*
- *Joggin' Erlong*

Collections of Short Stories:

- *Folks from Dixie*
- *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*
- *In Old Plantation Days*
- *The Heart of Happy Hollow*

Novels:

- *The Uncalled*
- *The Love of Landry*
- *The Fanatics*
- *The Sport of the Gods*

Contact

The Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial is owned by the Ohio Historical Society, managed by Dayton History, and a unit of Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park.

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