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## Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr.: First African American Teacher in Modern Pittsburgh Public Schools

Pennsylvania abolished discrimination in education in 1881, but nonetheless, no teachers or administrators of African descent were hired in the Pittsburgh Public Schools for the next 52 years. Educator Ralph Proctor asserts that PPS did not hire a single teacher of African descent from 1881 until 1933, and then it took until 1937 for the first full-time teacher to be hired—Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr.

Peeler was born in Shelby, North Carolina in 1908. His father, David, and mother, Zella, made Pittsburgh their home in the 1920s. His father was a contractor and served on the board of the Centre Avenue YMCA as well as a member of the Knights of Pythias fraternal brotherhood. David Peeler wanted an education for his children that he did not receive in Jim Crow segregated North Carolina. His son, Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr., graduated from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1932 with a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education. Peeler was among the first African American graduates of the Carnegie Tech School of Music. He received an additional degree from the Carnegie Institute in 1933 when he earned a Bachelor of Arts in violin.



**Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr., (first row, second from right) and students at Carnegie Tech campus, c. 1928.**

HHC Detre L&A, Paul Lawrence Peeler Papers and Photographs, 2016.0108.

Homer S. Brown, elected to the Pennsylvania House in 1934, went after the many laws that discriminated against African American workers and professionals. His investigation of the Pittsburgh Public School Board hiring practices was joined by the National Education Association that passed a resolution in 1937 against racial discrimination in teaching.<sup>1</sup> Brown looked at the PPS roster of 3,300 teachers and did not see one African American. In response to Homer S. Brown et

al, school solicitor N.R. Criss said “the Board informally considered turning over an entire school to Negro students taught by a Negro faculty in 1914, but that the Urban League objected and that the Board never formally faced the issue of hiring Negro teachers.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Urban League of Pittsburgh was founded in 1918, so Criss may have the wrong year, wrong organization, or gave misinformation in his statement. It had been a long held suspicion of the executive secretary



**Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr. (center) holding violin, c. 1920s.**

HHC Detre L&A, Paul Lawrence Peeler Papers and Photographs, 2016.0108.



of the Urban League, R. Maurice Moss, that the PPS board practiced discrimination in the hiring of teachers.<sup>3</sup> Brown's point was that the Board was comfortable in denying equal opportunity to African American teaching applicants and would restrict African American teachers from instructing white students.

With growing political pressure from legislators, unions, and the African American community, the PPS hired Peeler and a few other teachers for Hill District schools only. Racial attitudes dictated that African American teachers not provide instruction for white students, so the predominantly African American student population of Hill District schools became the recipients of the first black teachers in the district. Peeler taught part-time piano classes from 1934 to 1937 in the Watt, Conroy, and Larimer Evening Schools as well as other music classes from 1933 to 1937.

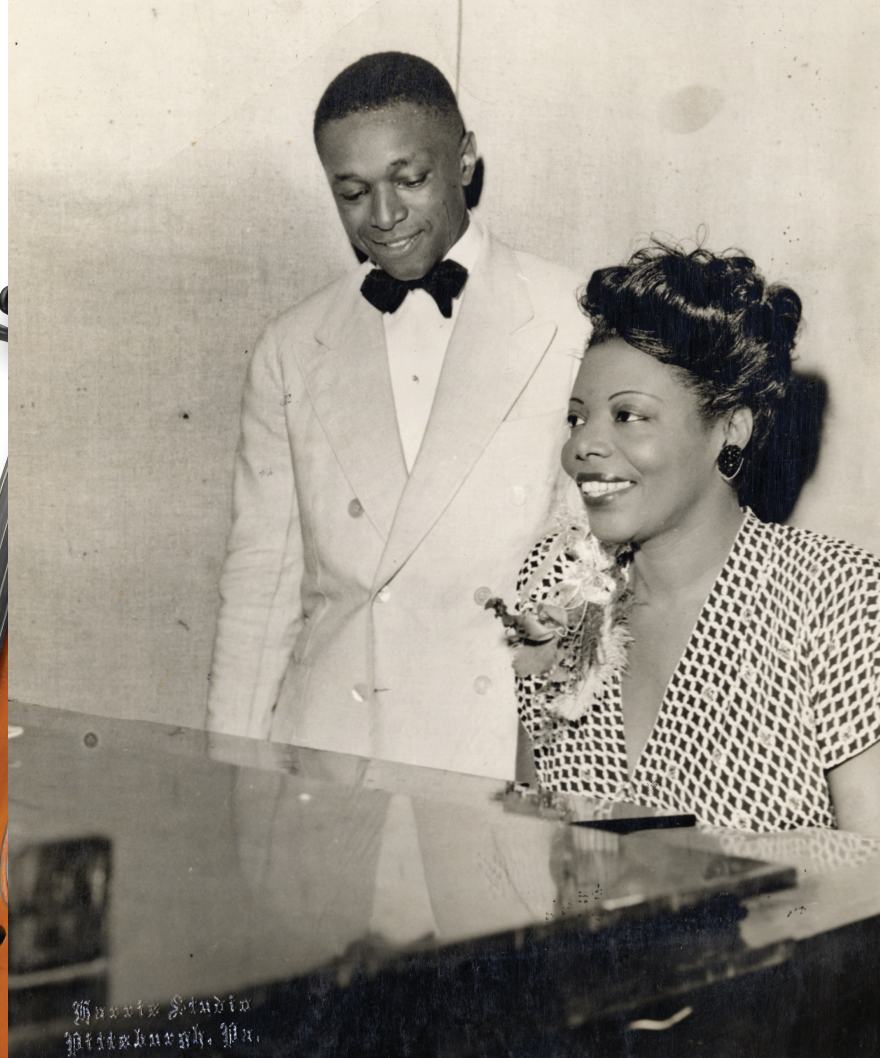
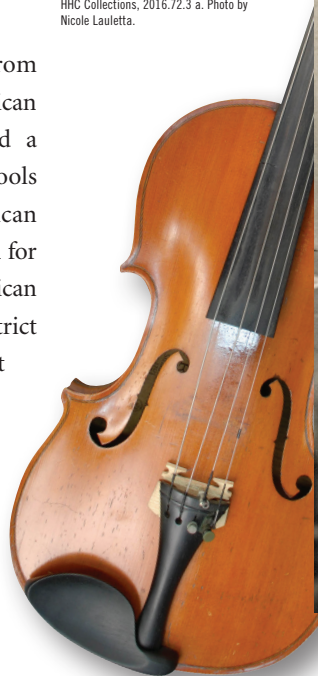
Superintendent Ben Graham, who had stonewalled any African American appointment, notified Peeler of his promotion on August 25, 1937. The letter from Graham indicated that Peeler would receive \$1,300 per year and be assigned to Watt Elementary School.<sup>4</sup>

During his long career as a teacher, Peeler organized and conducted the city's Folk Art Choir; organized and directed the Concert Orchestra of the Center Avenue YMCA; directed the Evening Schools Chorus and the Cathedral Choir of Wesley Center Church; was a solo violinist with the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM); and a violinist with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Peeler served on the committee on choirs of the NANM under the presidency of the National Negro Opera Company founder, Mary Cardwell Dawson.

After retirement in 1970, Peeler served as the coordinator for the "Centers for Musically Talented," a Federal Title III program of the Pittsburgh Board of Education. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Mr. Peeler

**Violin used by Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr., as a music teacher in Pittsburgh's Public Schools.**

HHC Collections, 2016.72.3 a. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.



**Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr., and Mary Lou Williams at the Night of Stars Extravaganza at the Syria Mosque, 1946.**

HHC Detre L&A, Paul Lawrence Peeler Papers and Photographs, 2016.0108.

served as a critic-teacher for undergraduate and graduate student-teachers from Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne Universities, worked as a camp counselor for the Pittsburgh Department of Parks and Recreation, conducted community and church choirs, and provided organist-choirmaster and musician services for folk and square dances. Peeler died in 1992 at the age of 84 in Ellicott City, Maryland.

While researching and presenting a paper at the 20th Anniversary of CAUSE, the Center for AfroAmerican Urban Studies and the Economy at Carnegie Mellon University in February 2016, I learned more about Paul Lawrence Peeler, Sr. It was at this time that Kristen Peeler, the granddaughter of the educator, contacted me, which led to the family

donating Peeler's instruments, sheet music, photographs, pamphlets, letters, and ephemera to the museum and Detre Library & Archives in 2016. This treasure of material culture helps us better understand the discrimination in the Pittsburgh Public Schools as well as the professional skill, talent, and influence of Peeler. It would be interesting to think what music education would have been like in the PPS without Peeler's dedicated work. 🌟

<sup>1</sup> Trotter and Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh Since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010) p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bulletin Index*, May 13, 1937 p. 9, 24.

<sup>4</sup> HHC Detre L&A, Peeler Papers, original letter signed, August 25, 1937.