The Mary Cardwell Dawson Collection

The Syria Mosque, long-remembered as the home of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Opera, also was the site of the premiere performance of what would become the National Negro Opera Company. Founded by Mary Cardwell Dawson, a native of North Carolina who migrated north and settled with her family in Munhall, the company performed Verdi’s *Aida* on August 29, 1941, launching opportunities for African American vocalists to perform opera at a time when few existed.

“Its aim is to open wide the door,” was one of the company’s goals outlined in a 1954 program. Prior to the formation of the National Negro Opera Company, Dawson created the Cardwell School of Music, which was located at 7101 Apple Street in a house rented from famed Hill District numbers runner William “Woogie” Harris. She also assembled the Cardwell-Dawson Choir, which gained recognition for performances at the Western Pennsylvania Choral Festival (sponsored by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*), the 1934 World’s Fair in Chicago, and the 1939 World’s Fair in New York. The school and choir drew upon Dawson’s connections with local church choirs for students and members, several of whom would become performers in the opera company. Today, a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker commemorating the company stands in front of the long abandoned Apple Street house, which was included on the Young Preservationists Association’s “Top Ten List of Best Preservation Opportunities” in 2003.

![Cardwell-Dawson Choir](image-url)
The Opera Company performed in many U.S. cities including Baltimore, New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. Their repertoire included Verdi's *Aida* and *La Traviata*, Gounod's *Faust*, and Bizet's *Carmen*. Dawson also made sure the company highlighted operas written by African American composers, specifically Robert Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses* and Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga*.

The National Negro Opera Company's last Pittsburgh performance was on Saturday, October 9, 1954, when they again performed *Aida*. Local photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, brother of Woogie, captured several images. Robert McFerrin, playing the role of Amonasro, would become the first permanent African American list for the Metropolitan Opera Company. His son, Bobby McFerrin, would make *Don't Worry, Be Happy* a household tune in 1988.

Just after the start of WWII, Dawson and her husband moved to Washington, D.C., effectively taking the NNOC away from Pittsburgh. However, Pittsburgh remained a guild location, and the company returned over the years for performances. After Dawson's death in 1962, the company could not sustain itself.

The Mary Cardwell Dawson Collection was donated to the Library & Archives at the History Center by her niece and personal assistant, Mrs. Barbara Lee. The collection consists of photographs, programs, receipts, correspondence, and news clippings chronicling the activities of Dawson and her husband, Walter. The materials provide us with a glimpse into the life of a dedicated musician, teacher, and mentor.

The Library and Archives is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. See a list of other materials in the collection in the "Finding Aids" section of the Historic Pittsburgh website at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/.