

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Paul Laurence Dunbar. Photo courtesy Dayton and Montgomery County Library.

Visitors to Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park often ask what the connection is between the park, whose name suggests a focus solely on aviation, and the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose last home is part of the park. It is a unique story that brings together three people, Dunbar and Wilbur and Orville Wright. Paul and Orville met in intermediate school and continued their friendship into high school. The two were interested in very different subjects: Paul favored literature while Orville preferred the sciences. The two found a common bond when the Wright brothers started a printing business and assisted Paul by printing handbills and tickets for his recitations as well as a newspaper he edited. While his story is linked to the Wright brothers, this is not the only reason Dunbar was included in the national park. His success and achievements make him a significant figure in American literature.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, on June 27, 1872, to former slaves. By the time he was in elementary school, Dunbar developed an interest in poetry and began composing his own poems. Several years later, in intermediate school, Paul often recited poems at assembly programs. These early poems impressed fellow student and budding inventor, Orville Wright, and the two became friends, often walking home from school together.

Dunbar entered Dayton's Central High School in 1886 as the only African American in his class. Active in student affairs, Dunbar joined the literary club in 1888 and became president for the 1891 spring semester. He also contributed to the school newspaper and went from general assistant editor to editor-in-chief his senior year. During this time Paul continued to write poetry and short stories and many were included in the school newspaper.

As Paul's interest in poetry and literature increased, he formed a partnership with Orville Wright, who operated a printing business with his brother Wilbur. Dunbar became a client in December 1890, when he started a weekly newspaper, *The Dayton Tattler*. He served as the editor and main contributor to the newspaper while the Wright brothers did the printing. The weekly newspaper targeted a local African-American



audience. Only three issues were published, for Dunbar stopped publication when the newspaper failed to make a profit.

Dunbar achieved his parents' dream and graduated from Central High School in 1891. Following graduation, the young poet searched for a job and dreamed of attending college. Instead, he encountered the racism and bigotry typical of his time. Frustrated with his failure to secure a job befitting a high school graduate, Dunbar accepted a position as an elevator operator.

At his new position, Dunbar continued his interest in literature by reading and writing poetry and short stories between elevator calls. For this reason he was often seen perched on his stool in the elevator surrounded by books and papers. After many failed attempts, Paul sold his first short story, written in a western dialect and titled, "The Tenderfoot," in December 1891 to the Kellogg Syndicate for six dollars.

In the summer of 1892, a former high school teacher invited Dunbar to present a welcoming address at the Western Association of Writers meeting in Dayton. Unable to attend the entire meeting, Dunbar left his elevator just prior to the recitation and returned immediately after the performance. The audience reacted favorably to his poetry, and the next day several people, including Dr. James Newton Matthews, stopped to speak with the poet. Impressed with Paul's poetry, Dr. Matthews included some of his poems in an article that was published in newspapers both in the United States and England. This article caught the attention of Indiana's Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley who wrote an encouraging letter to the young poet.

Riley's encouragement, as well as that of friends and supporters in Dayton, convinced

Dunbar to publish a book of his poetry. The book, *Oak and Ivy*, was printed and ready for sale by December 1892. With the publication of *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar's literary career continued to grow and opportunities for public performances increased. In the spring of 1893, Dunbar met Toledo attorney Charles Thatcher, who along with H.A. Tobey, superintendent of the Toledo State Hospital, assisted Dunbar in publishing his second book. Titled *Majors and Minors*, the book was released in 1896.

Following a review of his new book, Dunbar's life literally changed overnight. Given a copy of *Majors and Minors* by a friend, literary critic and novelist William Dean Howells wrote an enthusiastic review of the book for the June 1896 *Harpers Weekly*. Immediately thereafter Dunbar received numerous requests for copies of his book and further opportunities for recitations. The exposure vastly increased the recognition of Dunbar's work.

The resulting success led to a tour of England and then a job at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Paul quit the job at the library after only a year, for he was finally able to support himself solely through his writings and recitations. He continued to maintain his home in Washington, DC, though he was constantly out of town giving recitations.

A prolific writer, Dunbar produced over 400 poems, four novels, four volumes of short stories, and several plays. His poems were written in both traditional and dialectic verse. Reflecting the serious issues of his time, the poems often discussed life as an African American and equality. The dialect poems were light in character. Dunbar listened to older African Americans talk, and incorporated their dialect into poems about experiences and everyday life as a slave on a plantation.

Paul Laurence Dunbar died in Dayton in 1906, at age 33, of tuberculosis. The tragedy of early death of an acclaimed poet and author called further attention to his achievements. Dunbar's literary recognition and success provided real hope to young African Americans at a time when dominant white society encouraged them to pursue industrial arts instead of literary arts. His life was an example that offered new realms of possibilities for African-American youths. It was for this reason that many African-American schools throughout the United States bear his name.

The memorialization of Dunbar did not end with his death. In 1936, the state of Ohio purchased his last house, his only extant home in Dayton. Dunbar lived in the house for the last two years of his life, and his mother continued to occupy it until her death in 1934. It was opened by the Ohio Historical Society as a museum in 1938. The Secretary of the Interior designated the house a National Historic Landmark in 1977 and, in October 1992, the Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial became a partnership site of the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park. The national park was mandated to preserve the stories of Dunbar and the Wright brothers as well as the unique friendship among the three.

While recognition of Dunbar's works has decreased since his death, the significance of his achievements has not dimmed. The remaining schools, streets, park, and other buildings named after Dunbar are a testament to his success. The Paul Laurence Dunbar home, preserved as when Dunbar lived there, is one of the few places where the story of Dunbar's life and his vast achievements are presented.

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“Death Valley, You Live Where?”

Check out Death Valley National Park's recruitment video, “Death Valley, You Live Where?” The video was developed by the park's equal opportunity committee, to help with recruitment. Death Valley is working to increase its applicant pool, hoping to attract potential employees with diverse backgrounds. This video features footage of scenery, interviews with employees, and answers a variety of questions that potential applicants have. It is the first of its kind in the National Park Service.

The video was sent to all of the National Park Service sites and is available for loan from Death Valley National Park's personnel office. The committee also plans to conduct workshops in the local communities on how to effectively complete an application/resume for National Park Service jobs. For more information, call 760-786-2331 or contact our web site at: <<http://www.nps.gov/deva>>.