



# Mary Cardwell Dawson: A Passion for Music — *For All*

## Teacher's Guide

*This document is addressed to the instructor. Other documents in this lesson packet are addressed to students.*

This lesson on Mary Cardwell Dawson (1894-1962) takes students to an era when civil rights activism and artistic ambition combined. Mary's skill and passion for opera paved the way for hundreds of Black performers to launch or expand their musical careers. Her tireless work promoting the work of Black composers, insisting on the professional equality of Black musicians and dancers, and bringing opera to Black audiences helped ensure that the world of opera would be open to people of all races.

Students will explore the contributions of Mary and her National Negro Opera Company (NNOC) through a presentation on Mary's life and work, and have opportunities to reflect on the lesson through optional documents-based questions, case studies, research and discussion questions, and collaborative projects and activities.

This lesson gives the educator the needed flexibility to implement the various components according to their time allotment and curriculum goals. Rearrange or cut down the materials to suit your classroom conditions, timeframe, or student comfort level, or to connect with other material from an established syllabus or textbook.

*Dr. Karen M. Bryan of the Denyce Graves Foundation, a leading expert on the life of Mary Cardwell Dawson, contributed her wealth of knowledge to the development of this lesson.*

### **Full Class Session Instruction (1 class day, approximately 50 – 75 minutes):**

1. A "bell ringer" or lesson hook is a great way to stimulate student thinking and introduce a topic for the day's lesson. Suggested bell ringers to ask students:
  - "What is a vocation? How does one know when they are called to do something?"
  - "How do we know when equality has been achieved in a particular occupation or work? What does equality look like?"
  - "How do the arts reflect the events and ideologies of the day?"
2. The teacher should have the bell ringer displayed on the board and allow the students a few minutes to think independently about it. Next, students may turn to a peer to discuss their thoughts on the opening prompt. Finally, the teacher may ask for any students to volunteer to share their thoughts with the entire class.
3. Before moving into the lesson, ensure that students have some general knowledge about opera (see handout, [What Is Opera?](#)), the Haitian revolution, the Great Migration, and the labor movement. Supplemental documents (see embedded links) contain helpful

and interesting sub-topics that will give students a more complete picture of the era and challenges that Mary and other Black impresarios faced.

4. At this point, the teacher may open the Mary Cardwell Dawson [Slide Deck](#) and introduce students to the story of Mary and the National Negro Opera Company, and their mission to help Black performers succeed on the operatic stage.

5. After the [Slide Deck](#), the teacher may ask students to consider the following questions:

“How would you pursue your interest if opportunities were limited due to your skin color?”

“As a young person, what compels you to take the time to master your particular interest or gift?”

“Besides opera, name other genres of music. How familiar are you with opera?”

6. The next part of the lesson allows the teacher flexibility to group students together to read and discuss the lesson’s Case Studies. Each group may be assigned a particular Case Study to read and then to complete the accompanying questions. Groups may read more than one Case Study if time allows. Students may also be asked to develop a group statement about the Case Study to share with the class. The statement could articulate what surprised or interested them the most from the story.

8. At this point, the teacher may want to connect Mary Cardwell Dawson’s life experience and opera as entertainment to our current times and musical interests. A discussion question may be posed to help students understand the importance of and how her story can guide us today. Questions to be considered may include:

“What can the determination of Mary Cardwell Dawson teach us today?”

“The establishment of the National Negro Opera Company required sacrifice, cooperation from the cast members, and grit to face discriminatory rules. In what ways does a group of like-minded or similarly skilled individuals that you know work well together? What about your class? Or a school club or sports team?”

“If you were going to form an organization, what larger purpose would it serve? What would its motto and founding principles be?”

9. Lesson may conclude with students writing a brief reflection on the story of Mary Cardwell Dawson or discussing its significance in small groups. Possible extensions of the lesson include answering Case Study questions, responses to the Documents Based Questions (DBQs) included as a supplement, and/or completion of some of the Activities and Assignments or Critical Thinking Questions.



[Download All DBQs](#)



[Download All Case Studies](#)



[Download Slide Deck \(printable PDF\)](#)



[Download "What is Opera"?](#)

## Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to describe the:

- National debut of Black opera in the US in an era of discrimination;
- Responsibilities of an impresario;
- History of the Cardwell Dawson School of Music, Cardwell Dawson Choir, and the National Negro Opera Company;
- Role unions and political events play in the content and execution of art;
- Components of opera as an artform and famous operatic performances;
- Role of the Great Migration in establishing centers of Black artistic movements;
- Role of family, faith, and community in activism and the arts.

**Students will define the following vocabulary words, drawn from the Slide Deck:**

curriculum, declamation, genre, Great Migration, impresario, music theory, repertoire/reperatory, oratorio, pageant, protégé, theatrical, tonality

## Additional Research, Writing, and Discussion Prompts



[Critical Thinking Questions](#)



[Activities and Assignments](#)



[Woodson Principles Applied](#)

## Primary Sources

[Charles "Teenie" Harris Collection](#) – Carnegie Museum of Art

[National Negro Opera Company](#) (with timeline) – Social Networks and Archival Context

[National Negro Opera Company Programs and Promotional Materials: Henry P. Whitehead Collection](#) – Smithsonian

[Mary Cardwell Dawson: First Lady of Opera](#) – Library of Congress

[Madame Lillian Evanti](#) – Anacostia Community Museum (Smithsonian)



## Additional Resources

### Media

- [The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson](#) – Pittsburgh Opera Trailer (2 min 38 sec)
- [The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson](#) – Glimmerglass Festival Trailer (1 min)
- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) – TeacherTube (6 min 33 seconds)
- [Nation’s First Black Opera Company](#) – Apple Street House restoration (4 min 37 sec)
- [The Haitian Revolution and Its Causes](#) – OER Project (12 min 16 sec)
- [“Mary Cardwell Dawson and the National Negro Opera Company”](#) – Karen M. Bryan American Musicological Society Lecture – Library of Congress (1 hr 13 min)

### Articles

- [The Founder of This Trailblazing Opera Company Put Black Singers at Center Stage](#) – Michael J. Solender, *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2024.
- [A Conversation with Denyce Graves About Mary Cardwell Dawson](#) – Fredara Mareva Hadley, *Women’s Song Forum*, 2021.
- [A Black Conservatory in a Segregated Nation](#) – Musical Geography
- [More than the Band, part 2](#) – The Hundered-Seven
- [The Preservation Puzzle of Mystery Manor](#) – Patrick Sisson, *Curbed*, May 2016.
- [Preserving the Black Experience Through Performance \(Charles “Teenie” Harris photographs\)](#) – Dante A. Ciampaglia, *Time*, June 2016.

### Web Resources

- [The Denyce Graves Foundation](#)
- [Hidden Voices Project – The Denyce Graves Foundation](#)
- [Mary Cardwell Dawson Exhibit – The Denyce Graves Foundation](#)
- [National Opera House \(Pittsburgh, PA\)](#)
- [Woodson Center Curriculum Lessons](#)



## Standards and Learning Objectives

### College, Career, & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

#### CIVICS

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2.Civ.7.9-12. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

#### GEOGRAPHY

D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

D2.Geo.5.9-12. Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.

D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

D2.Geo.7.9-12. Analyze the reciprocal nature of how historical events and the spatial diffusion of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices have influenced migration patterns and the distribution of human population.

D2.Geo.8.9-12. Evaluate the impact of economic activities and political decisions on spatial patterns within and among urban, suburban, and rural regions.

#### HISTORY

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.



D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

## **ELA**

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

D4.2.9-12. Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical).

D4.6.9-12. Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.

D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.



## AP U.S. History

Theme 1: American and National Identity NAT

Theme 2: Work, Exchange and Technology (WXT)

Theme 4: Migration and Settlement (MIG)

Theme 5: Politics and Power PCE

Theme 7: American and Regional Culture ARC

Theme 8: Social Structures SOC

4.B Explain how a specific historical development or process is situated within a broader historical context.

KC-6.1.II.C

Labor and management battled over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting business leaders.

KC-6.1.II.B.ii The industrial workforce expanded and became more diverse through internal and international migration.

KC-6.2.I.B

Urban neighborhoods based on particular ethnicities, races, and classes provided new cultural opportunities for city dwellers.

KC-6.3.I.C

A number of artists and critics, including agrarians, utopians, socialists, and advocates of the Social Gospel, championed alternative visions for the economy and U.S. society.

KC-6.2

The migrations that accompanied industrialization transformed both urban and rural areas of the United States and caused dramatic social and cultural change.

KC-6.2.I

International and internal migration increased urban populations and fostered the growth of a new urban culture.

KC-7.1.I

The United States continued its transition from a rural, agricultural economy to an urban, industrial economy led by large companies.



KC-7.2.II.C

In the Great Migration during and after World War I, African Americans escaping segregation, racial violence, and limited economic opportunity in the South moved to the North and West, where they found new opportunities but still encountered discrimination.

KC-7.2.I.B

Migration gave rise to new forms of art and literature that expressed ethnic and regional identities, such as the Harlem Renaissance movement.

KC-7.2.I.D

In the 1920s, cultural and political controversies emerged as Americans debated gender roles, modernism, science, religion, and issues related to race and immigration.

### AP English Language and Composition

4.A Develop a paragraph that includes a claim and evidence supporting the claim.

4.B Write a thesis statement that requires proof or defense and that may preview the structure.

4.C Qualify a claim using modifiers, counterarguments, or alternative perspectives

6.A Develop a line of reasoning and commentary that explains it throughout an argument.

6.B Use transitional elements to guide the reader through the line of reasoning of an argument.

6.C Use appropriate methods of development to advance an argument.

8.B Write sentences that clearly convey ideas and arguments.

8.C Use established conventions of grammar and mechanics to communicate clearly and effectively.