

Mary Cardwell Dawson:

A Passion for Music –*For All*

Teacher's Guide: K-8

Overview:

Mary Cardwell Dawson ushered Black American opera onto the stage by spearheading the charge to allow Black creatives (singers, instrumentalists, set and costume designers, etc.) to enter this genre traditionally dominated by White artists. Famous operas like *La Traviata* and *Aida*, as well as original works by Black creators, continue to take center stage in Black American theatre due to the legacy of sacrifice and dedication made by Mary and her husband, Walter Dawson.

The Woodson Center lesson on Mary Cardwell Dawson takes students into an era when activism and the arts combined, giving teachers great flexibility and choice in what sub-topics and stories to share with their students.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, K-8 students will be able to:

- Locate Pittsburgh, PA; New York, NY; Washington D.C.; Haiti on a map;
- Define key terms: impresario, opera, union, libretto;
- Understand how individual choices and outside factors can impact one's goals and dreams;
- Explain discrimination related to American opera and theater productions in the mid 20th Century;
- Understand the benefits of family and community working together for a common goal;
- Identify and explain the significance of the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC);
- Discuss the business aspects of pursuing a dream.

See the step-by-step lesson plan below or implement your own plan according to your time allowance and student appropriateness. In addition to the [Slide Deck](#) that tells the story of Mary Cardwell Dawson, the supplemental materials below can be used to spark group discussion and allow independent classwork. Included in the Activity Pack are:

[Activities and Assignments](#) (Grades K-8)

[Multiple Choice Questions](#) (Grades 2-5)

[Critical Thinking Exercises](#) (Grades K-5 with guidance; 6-8 unassisted)

[Crossword Puzzle with Answer Key](#) (Grades 2-4)

[Coloring Page](#) (Grades K-2)

[Woodson Principles](#)

Selected Videos (see below)

Students will define the following vocabulary words, drawn from the Slide Deck, Case Studies, and other supplementary documents:

Vocabulary:

Blacklist, Enterprise, Epic, Genre, Great Migration, Guild, Impresario, Indomitable, Integrate, Multiethnic, Music Theory, Recital, Shortfall, Stockyard, Tuition

A Step by Step Lesson Plan:

Note: Before diving into the lesson, teachers can allocate 5-10 minutes of class time to give students background information about the time in which Mary Cardwell Dawson lived.

#1 - #3 help with introducing lesson and background information.

1. A “bell ringer” or lesson hook is always a great way to grab a student’s attention and interest in the specific topic for the day’s lesson. Suggested bell ringers:

Why is it important for individuals of different races to be allowed to take part in artistic and creative expression?

Have you ever been told that you could not be good at something because of your race or culture? How did that make you feel?

The teacher should write the bell ringer displayed on the board and say it a few times as the students think about the question. Ask students to raise their hands and share their answers.

2. The teacher may want to take a few minutes to discuss:
 - the history of opera (link to [“What is Opera?”](#))
 - the influence of HBCUs for arts communities;
 - the rise of the NNOC

Other helpful video resources can be found in the resource list below, including relevant Woodson Center curriculum lessons.

3. The teacher may open the Dawson [Slide Deck](#) and read the story of her life and work.
4. After reading the "What is Opera?" handout, the teacher may pause and ask students the following questions:

Grades K-2

"Why do people like to sing?"

"What makes stage performances exciting to watch?"

Grades 3 – 5

"Why is the musical genre of opera unfamiliar to some people?"

"What makes stage performances exciting to watch?"

Grades 6-8

"How would you pursue your interests if opportunities were denied to you due to a physical characteristic, like skin color?"

"What makes stage performances exciting to watch?"

5. The next part of the lesson allows several options for K-8 Teachers:
 - Teachers can use the [Activities and Assignments](#), to combine the lesson with other subjects. See SLOs.
 - Teachers can use [Critical Thinking Questions](#) to generate further discussion and stimulate individual reflection.
 - Teachers may use suggested videos to expand student's comprehension of the lesson.
6. For the [Activities and Assignments](#) dealing with the Great Migration, teachers can pass out maps (see links) of the Caribbean and the US to give students a visual frame of reference for this lesson.

Available maps for this lesson: [Map of Caribbean](#), [Map of United States](#)

7. Lesson may conclude with any of the supplementary materials in the Activity Pack, which includes a coloring sheet, crossword puzzle and the multiple-choice worksheet.

Additional Resources for Teachers and Students

Primary Sources

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

[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)

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)

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.

[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

[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

Grades K-2

Civics

- D2.Civ.2.K-2. Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in a community.
- D2.Civ.8.K-2. Describe democratic principles such as equality, fairness, and respect for legitimate authority and rules.
- D2.Civ.14.K-2. Describe how people have tried to improve their communities over time.

Economics

- D2.Eco.3.K-2. Describe the skills and knowledge required to produce certain goods and services.

Geography

- D2.Geo.2.K-2. Use maps, graphs, photographs, and other representations to describe places and the relationships and interactions that shape them.
- D2.Geo.3.K-2. Use maps, globes, and other simple geographic models to identify cultural and environmental characteristics of places.
- D2.Geo.6.K-2. Identify some cultural and environmental characteristics of specific places.
- D2.Geo.7.K-2. Explain why and how people, goods, and ideas move from place to place.

History

- D2.His.1.K-2. Create a chronological sequence of multiple events.
- D2.His.2.K-2. Compare life in the past to life today.
- D2.His.3.K-2. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped a significant historical change.
- D2.His.4.K-2. Compare perspectives of people in the past to those of people in the present.
- D2.His.14.K-2. Generate possible reasons for an event or development in the past.

ELA

- D4.1.K-2. Construct an argument with reasons.
- D4.2.K-2. Construct explanations using correct sequence and relevant information.
- D4.3.K-2. Present a summary of an argument using print, oral, and digital technologies.
- D4.4.K-2. Ask and answer questions about arguments.
- D4.5.K-2. Ask and answer questions about explanations.

Grades 3-5

Civics

- D2.Civ.6.3-5. Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, workplaces, voluntary organizations, and families.
- D2.Civ.7.3-5. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school settings.
- D2.Civ.8.3-5. Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities.
- D2.Civ.10.3-5. Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own

and others' points of view about civic issues.

D2.Civ.12.3-5. Explain how rules and laws change society and how people change rules and laws.

D2.Civ.14.3-5. Illustrate historical and contemporary means of changing society.

Economics

D2.Eco.1.3-5. Compare the benefits and costs of individual choices.

D2.Eco.2.3-5. Identify positive and negative incentives that influence the decisions people make.

D2.Eco.3.3-5. Identify examples of the variety of resources (human capital, physical capital, and natural resources) that are used to produce goods and services.

Geography

D2.Geo.1.3-5. Construct maps and other graphic representations of both familiar and unfamiliar places.

D2.Geo.6.3-5. Describe how environmental and cultural characteristics influence population distribution in specific places or regions.

D2.Geo.7.3-5. Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas.

History

D2.His.2.3-5. Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

D2.His.3.3-5. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.

D2.His.4.3-5. Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period differed in their perspectives.

D2.His.14.3-5. Explain probable causes and effects of events and developments.

D2.His.16.3-5. Use evidence to develop a claim about the past.

ELA

D4.1.3-5. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.

D4.2.3-5. Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data.

D4.6.3-5. Draw on disciplinary concepts to explain the challenges people have faced and opportunities they have created, in addressing local, regional, and global problems at various times and places.

D4.7.3-5. Explain different strategies and approaches students and others could take in working alone and together to address local, regional, and global problems, and predict possible results of their actions.

Grades 6-8

Civics

D2.Civ.6.6-8. Describe the roles of political, civil, and economic organizations in shaping people's lives.

D2.Civ.10.6-8. Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and

democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

D2.Civ.14.6-8. Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.

Geography

D2.Geo.1.6-8. Construct maps to represent and explain the spatial patterns of cultural and environmental characteristics.

D2.Geo.5.6-8. Analyze the combinations of cultural and environmental characteristics that make places both similar to and different from other places.

D2.Geo.7.6-8. Explain how changes in transportation and communication technology influence the spatial connections among human settlements and affect the diffusion of ideas and cultural practices.

History

D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.6-8. Classify series of historical events and developments as examples of change and/or continuity.

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.4.6-8. Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.6-8. Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

D2.His.14.6-8. Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.

D2.His.15.6-8. Evaluate the relative influence of various causes of events and developments in the past.

D2.His.16.6-8. Organize applicable evidence into a coherent argument about the past.

ELA

D4.1.6-8. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

D4.2.6-8. Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.

D4.7.6-8. Assess their individual and collective capacities to take action to address local, regional, and global problems, taking into account a range of possible levers of power, strategies, and potential outcomes.