



SINCE 1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



A Mother's Love

120 years ago tomorrow, Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of Dayton's most renowned poets, died. Aged only 33, he succumbed to a years-long battle with tuberculosis. At Paul's side was his mother, Matilda Burton Murphy Dunbar.

By all accounts, Matilda and Paul were very close, living together for most of his life. Matilda even moved to Washington, D.C., to live with him after Paul's marriage to Alice Moore. When their marriage broke up, Matilda and Paul spent some time in Chicago before returning to Dayton in 1903. Their home on North Summit Street, purchased the following year, is now the Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial, or simply; the Dunbar House.



Above: the Dunbar home on North Summit street (now Paul Laurence Dunbar street); ca. 1940-1970. Courtesy of the [Ohio History Connection](#).

After Paul's death in 1906, Matilda continued to live in their home. Until her failing health made it impossible for her to do so, Mrs. Dunbar personally cared for Paul's study and library, which remained practically as he had left it. Matilda gained a reputation as a gracious, well-spoken hostess; "a bright conversationalist, an incessant reader and a lover of all that was beautiful in all lines of artistic endeavor[1]."

Intent on preserving Paul's legacy, Matilda specified in her will that his room and its contents remain unchanged:



"It is my particular request that the room which my late son used as his library, be preserved as such, and that all the books, manuscripts,



Matilda J. Dunbar

(10/5/1845 – 2/24/1934)

In the spring of 1866, Matilda Dunbar came to Dayton with her two young sons to be nearer to her own mother.

Here in Dayton, Matilda met and married Joshua Dunbar. Together they welcomed a son, Paul; and a daughter, Lizzie, who died shortly before her third birthday.

Denied the opportunity for education in her youth, Matilda worked hard to attain it as an adult. While working as a launderer and caring for her young children, at night she attended classes at the tenth district school on Ziegler Street. From her example, Matilda's children learned to appreciate both the beauty of the written word and the value of a good education.

When Matilda, affectionately called 'Mother Dunbar', died at the age of 89, her funeral was held at the Paul Laurence Dunbar High School on Summit street. Every available chair in the auditorium was filled. Addressing the crowd, Mayor Charles J. Brennan "stressed that the heights which Paul Laurence Dunbar attained in the world of literature were but a reflection of the hopes and yearnings of his mother.[3]"

Matilda Burton Murphy Dunbar is laid to rest with her two youngest children in section 101, lot 3465 at Woodland Cemetery.

Above: Matilda Dunbar. Photo by Jane Reece, ca. 1900-1930. Courtesy of the [Paul Laurence Dunbar Gallery](#) at Wright State University.

pictures, furniture, and mementos of all kinds in said library room be kept intact as they are now, as I have no doubt it will be of interest to many who visit this spot from time to time, and who may continue to do so.[2]”

The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society (today the Ohio Historical Society) acquired the house after Matilda’s death and formally opened it as a museum in 1938; the Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial became part of Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park in 1992.

Left: Paul Laurence Dunbar’s study. Photo credit: Lisa Powel & the [Dayton Daily News](#).

Sources:

[1] "Final Tributes Will Be Paid to Mrs. Dunbar in Public Service." *The Dayton Journal* 2/25/1934. Page 12.

[2] Last Will and Testament of Matilda J. Dunbar, November 5, 1932. Montgomery County, Ohio, Probate Court; Will Record 91, page 121. Montgomery County Records Center and Archives.

[3] “As Final Tribute Was Paid Mrs. Dunbar” *Dayton Daily News*, 2/28/1934

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