Today in History - June 27

June 27
Select date June 27 Go

Today's Stories: **The Smithsonian Institution** | **Paul Laurence Dunbar**

Listen to this page

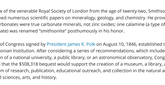
The Smithsonian Institution

British scientist James Smithson died on **June 27**, 1829. He left an endowment "to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an "establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." Some regarded his bequest as a trifle eccentric, considering Smithson had neither traveled to nor corresponded with anyone in America.

Smithsonian Institution, Exterior of Smithsonian Institution Building 1, Theodor Horydczak, photographer, ca. 1920-1950. Horydczak Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

A fellow of the venerable Royal Society of London from the age of twenty-two, Smithson published numerous scientific papers on mineralogy, geology, and chemistry. He proved that zinc carbonates were true carbonate minerals, not zinc oxides; zinc calamine (a type of zinc carbonate) was renamed "smithsonite" posthumously in his honor.

An act of Congress signed by President James K. Polk on August 10, 1846, established the Smithsonian Institution. After considering a series of recommendations, which included the creation of a national university, a public library, or an astronomical observatory, Congress agreed that the $508,318 bequest would support the creation of a museum, a library, and a program of research, publication, educational outreach, and collection in the natural and applied sciences, arts, and history.



Smithsonian Institution, Natural History Museum 1, Theodor Horydczak, photographer, ca. 1920-1950. Horydczak Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

The collections and libraries of the Smithsonian have continued to grow through donations and purchases. Today, the Institution comprises 19 museums, 144 affiliate museums, and 9 research centers throughout the United States and the world. The original Smithsonian Institution Building is popularly known as the Castle. Visitors to Washington, D.C., can frequent a variety of Smithsonian facilities including the National Museum of Natural History, which houses the natural science collections, the National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Portrait Gallery. Opened in 2016, The National Museum of African American History and Culture is the latest addition to the Smithsonian Institution's collection of museums.

The National Air & Space Museum, which exhibits marvels of aviation history such as the Wright brothers' 1903 Flyer and Charles Lindbergh's airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis, has the distinction of being the most visited museum in the world.

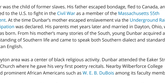
Smithsonian Institution Building. Costumes of Presidents' Wives Exhibit., Theodor Horydczak, photographer, ca. 1920-1950. Horydczak Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

Learn More

- Visit the Smithsonian Institution website to learn more about this American treasure trove and to find a complete listing of all Smithsonian museums and research centers. To see featured items from the Smithsonian collections search the Collections by Object Groups.
- Search on Smithsonian in the Horydczak Collection for more photographs of the museum buildings and exhibits.
- A search on *Smithsonian Institution* in A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875 yields a wide variety of historical documents relating to the institution including resolutions and statutes on its establishment and funding. Read the blog post "Establishing the Smithsonian Institution" for additional information on legal aspects governing the Smithsonian.
- A portrait statue of Joseph Henry, a physicist and first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, is displayed in the Main Reading Room in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. Under his administration, the 40,000-volume collection of the Smithsonian's library was transferred to the Library of Congress.
- A search on *Smithsonian Institution* in Chronicling America yields a wealth of newspaper articles on the establishment and development of the Smithsonian and on the building of the Smithsonian Castle, the Arts and Industries Building, and the National Museum of Natural History – the first three Smithsonian buildings.
- In 1877 Frederick Douglass delivered an address entitled "Lecture on Our National Capital." That address was reprinted in 1978 by the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. Search on *Frederick Douglass* in the collection The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, 1600-1925 to locate that item as well as Douglass' autobiography.
- Alexander Graham Bell was elected a regent of the Smithsonian Institution in 1898. Search on the keyword *Smithsonian* or *museum* in the collection Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers at the Library of Congress to find a number of items related to Bell's involvement with the institution. See, for example, the "Proceedings of [the] Regents Meeting" held in January 1898 regarding Bell's donation to the Smithsonian's Astrophysical Observatory.
- Search on the term *museum* in the Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1606 to 1827 to learn more about Jefferson's concern for the preservation of artifacts both cultural and natural. See, for example, Jefferson's copy of the 1796 pamphlet by Mademoiselle Lanoux du Chateau, *Plan for a Women's Museum* or Jefferson's 1825 letter to General William Clark, requesting a donation to the new University of Virginia, "not of money… but for chrystals minerals small Indian worthy and other curiosities which might be easily transported and preserved."
- Search on *museum* in the pictorial collections to see a wide variety of additional images.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born on **June 27**, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio. Although he died when he was only thirty-three, Dunbar had achieved international acclaim as a poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, and lyricist.



Paul Laurence Dunbar, Illus. in Lyrics of sunshine and shadow / by Paul Laurence Dunbar. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905, frontispiece. Prints & Photographs Division

Dunbar was the child of former slaves. His father escaped bondage, fled to Canada, and returned to the U.S. to fight in the Civil War as a member of the Massachusetts 55th Regiment. At the time Dunbar's mother escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad, she was pregnant with her first child. Many years later, her daughter recalled that, when Paul was born, from his mother's many stories of the South, young Dunbar acquired an understanding of Southern life and came to speak both Southern dialect and standard American English.

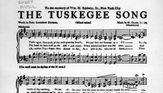
The Dayton area was a center of black religious activity. Dunbar attended the Eaker Street A.M.E. Church where he gave his very first poetry recitals. Nearby Wilberforce College boasted prominent African Americans such as W. E. B. DuBois among its faculty members.

Although he was the only African American in his middle and high schools, Dunbar was accepted by his classmates and served as editor of his high school paper and president of the literary club. He courted classmate Orville Wright as one of his best friends. Together, the two boys briefly published a newspaper, the Dayton Tattler; their money ran out after just three issues.

Parade Ground and Campus, Soldiers' Home, Dayton, Ohio, William Henry Jackson, photographer, ca. 1902. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

Dunbar's parents separated when he was a child and his father lived for years at the Soldiers' Home. In 1891, Dunbar graduated from Central High School. Central was demolished in 1914 and a new school, Steele, was constructed at the southeast corner of North Main Street and Monument Avenue.

Steele High School and Soldiers' Monument, Dayton, Ohio, ca. 1900-1906. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division



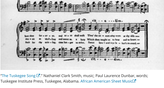
Main Street, Dayton, Ohio, c.1904. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

Dunbar worked as an elevator operator in the Callahan Building (spired building, above) on Main Street. In 1892, Dunbar published a volume of his own poetry entitled *Oak and Ivy*, which he sold to his elevator passengers.

In 1893, Dunbar went to Chicago with plans to write about the World's Columbian Exposition where he met Frederick Douglass, then commissioner of the fair's Haitian Pavilion. Douglass invited Dunbar to work as his personal assistant and to share the podium, supporting the young poet's efforts. During the fair Dunbar met a number of his peers and future literary lights including James Weldon Johnson, Richard B. Harrison, and Will Marion Cook, with whom he later wrote the musical piece *Clorindy: The Origin of the Cake Walk*. (See the two 1903 films *Coax Walk* and *Comedy Cake Walk* documenting this dance featuring fancy strutting, named after the prize awarded in the original contest.)

After the publication of *Majors and Minors* (1895) and *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* (1896), Dunbar's name became internationally recognized. During a trip to England, Dunbar met the African-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. The two reportedly collaborated on a collection of choral pieces entitled *Seven African Romances* and the opera *Dream Lovers*.

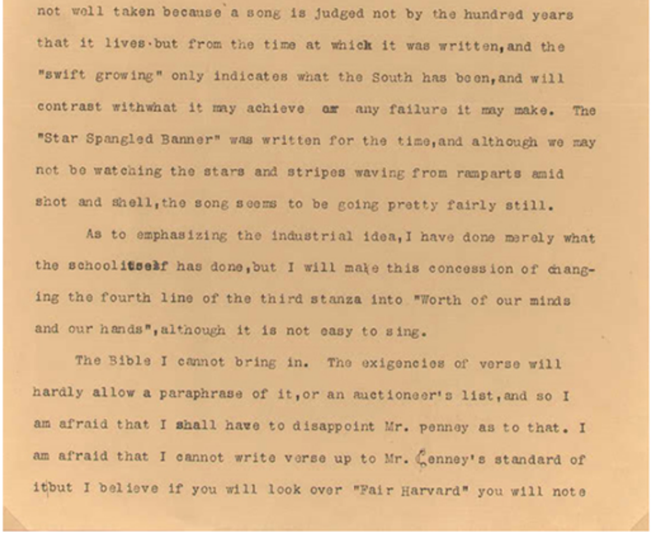
Returning from abroad, Dunbar settled in Washington, D.C., and accepted a position as a library assistant at the Library of Congress. He found the work tiresome, however, and it is believed that the Library's dust contributed to his worsening case of tuberculosis. He worked there for only a year before quitting to write and recite his works full-time.



"The Tuskegee Song [?]," Nathaniel Clark Smith, music; Paul Laurence Dunbar, words; Tuskegee Institute Press, Tuskegee, Alabama. African American Sheet Music

In 1902, Booker T. Washington commissioned Dunbar to write the school song for the Tuskegee Institute. Dunbar wrote lyrics to the tune of "Hail! Hail! Columbia." Washington was not pleased with the "Tuskegee Song." He objected to Dunbar's emphasis on "the industrial idea," and the exclusion of biblical references. In this letter to Washington, Dunbar defends his work.

Jan. 15 1903
Dr. Booker T. Washington,
Tuskegee, Ala.,
My dear Dr. Washington:
I have just heard and have read the song. It
has first been brought to my attention by the



not well taken because a song is judged not by the hundred years that it lives but from the time at which it was written, and the "swift growing" only indicates what the South has been, and will contrast with what it may achieve or any failure it may make. The "Star Spangled Banner" was written for the time, and although we may not be watching the stars and stripes waving from ramparts amid shot and shell, the song seems to be going pretty fairly still.

As to emphasizing the industrial idea, I have done merely what the school itself has done, but I will make this concession of changing the fourth line of the third stanza into "Worth of our minds and our hands", although it is not easy to sing.

The Bible I cannot bring in. The exigencies of verse will hardly allow a paraphrase of it, or an auctioneer's list, and so I am afraid that I shall have to disappoint Mr. penney as to that. I am afraid that I cannot write verse up to Mr. Penney's standard of it but I believe if you will look over "Fair Harvard" you will note

Letter. Paul Laurence Dunbar to Booker T. Washington, January 23, 1902. (Booker T. Washington Papers). Manuscript Division. The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship. Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society, Paul Laurence Dunbar House State Memorial

By the turn of the century, Paul Laurence Dunbar was the most celebrated black writer in America. He wrote for the broadest possible audience, yet his reputation rested on his mastery of dialect verse which employed colloquial vocabulary and spellings that were, for the most part, African American. In his use of vernacular speech, Dunbar has been compared to Mark Twain and James Whitcomb Riley.

Dunbar published twenty-two books and numerous articles and poems before his death in 1906—likely the result of a combination of factors including tuberculosis, exhaustion in the wake of pneumonia, and alcoholism.

> *Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,*
> *Whah de branch go a-singin' as to pass;*
> *an' w'en I's a-layin' low,*
> *I kin hyeah it as it go,*
> *Singin', "Sleep, my honey; tek yo res' at las'."*
>
> Inscription on the grave of Paul Laurence Dunbar

Learn More

- Consult the Web guide Paul Laurence Dunbar: Online Resources to locate additional resources.
- As an Ohioan of distinction and determination, *Paul Laurence Dunbar* is well represented in the collections found in Ohio Memory, a collaboration of the Ohio History Connection and the State Library of Ohio. Read the post, "He Sang of Life" – The Writing of Paul Laurence Dunbar which commemorates Dunbar's birthday and provides links to some of the digitized collection items.
- See the Today in History features on Dunbar contemporaries including W. C. Handy, Mary Church Terrell, and Booker T. Washington. Also search Today in History on *Ohio* to learn about other events and people connected with the Buckeye State.
- See the online exhibition The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship, which explores black America's quest for equality from the early national period through the twentieth century.
- Search on the names *James Weldon Johnson*, *Will Marion Cook,* or *Paul Laurence Dunbar* in Duke University Libraries Historic American Sheet Music and in Brown University Library's African American Sheet Music for music or lyrics composed by these men around the turn of the century.
- Another Library of Congress employee, Daniel A. P. Murray (1852-1925) contributed a great deal to the preservation of African-American culture. Murray gathered books and pamphlets for the Exhibit of Negro Authors at the 1900 Paris Exposition, a collection that forms the nucleus of African American Perspectives: Materials Selected from the Rare Book Collection.
- The famous photographer William Henry Jackson took many photos of Dayton in the early 1900s. Search the Detroit Publishing Company collection using the terms *Dayton AND Jackson* to see them.

Copyright United States Copyright Office