

*Historic Review Commission of Pittsburgh*

200 Ross Street, Fourth Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15219

## NOMINATION FORM FOR HISTORIC STRUCTURES, SITES, OBJECTS, AND DISTRICTS

1. **HISTORICAL NAME OF PROPERTY**      William A. "Woogie" Harris House

2. **CURRENT NAME OF PROPERTY**                      National Negro Opera House

3. **LOCATION**

Street              7101 Apple Street  
City, State        Pittsburgh, PA  
Zip Code          15206

4. **OWNERSHIP**

Name:              Miriam White & Jonnet Solomon  
Street              7352 Kelly Street  
City, State        Pittsburgh, PA  
Zip Code          15208

5. **CLASSIFICATION**

<u>Category</u>	<u>Accessibility</u>	<u>Ownership</u>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private
<input type="checkbox"/> District	<input type="checkbox"/> Private, Open to the public	<input type="checkbox"/> Public
<input type="checkbox"/> Site		
<input type="checkbox"/> Object		

6. **NOMINATED BY**

Name Noel Jenkins, c/o Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh  
Street 7144 Apple Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15206

## 7. DESCRIPTION

Provide a narrative description of the structure, district, site, or object. If it has been altered over time, indicate the date(s) and nature of the alteration(s). (Attach extra pages if necessary.)

Set on a high terrace overlooking Homewood (the property is actually in the Lincoln-Lemington neighborhood, but Homewood West is across the street), this is a large (7,074 square feet), square Queen Anne house with a cross gable roof with four interior end chimneys and a round turret at the south corner. It sits on a large 38,856 square-foot lot, which has a steeply sloping hillside behind the house. The wrap-around porch rests on paired columns with stone bases and entrance steps at the center of the southwest façade. The windows are all double-hung sash replacement.

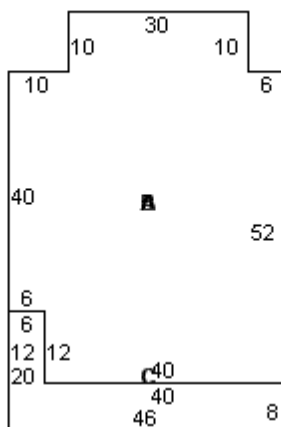
The house has been vacant since at least 2000. It is experiencing advanced decay most noticeably along the northwest porch roof line, porch flooring, and northeast corner of the house's roof, around the turret. One of the NE rear chimneys is deteriorating, and bricks have fallen into the valley around the turret. The exterior concrete stucco has begun to chip away.

Glass panels below the porch have been cracked and shattered. The weight of the porch roof has buckled the stone support beams. The porch flooring appears unstable and rotted.

The rear of the house also shows advanced damage from vandalism. On the first floor, a large, rear window is missing, and a NE side window has been smashed. Exterior metal fire steps leading up to the second floor are flimsy, and an exterior wall on the second floor, next to the steps, has been badly damaged; interior framing is exposed. The property is accessible through open doors or windows.

Inside, the house has been vandalized substantially. Paint is peeling and there are numerous large holes in the floors and ceilings of the bathrooms where vandals ripped out copper piping. Toilets and other ceramic fixtures have been ripped down and smashed. Doors have been removed. Decorative woodwork has been stripped in most rooms. All of the wooden fireplace mantles have been removed. On the third floor, in the turret, a large hole in the ceiling appears where water has penetrated the roof (most likely from where the bricks fell off the rear exterior chimney).

Building dimensions, from the Allegheny County real estate assessment website:



## 8. HISTORY

Provide a history of the structure, district, site, or object. Include a bibliography of sources consulted. (Attach extra pages if necessary.) Include copies of relevant source materials with the nomination form (see Number 11).

The house at 7101 Apple Street from its creation in 1894 till the death of Woogie Harris in 1967 housed some of the most influential and culturally significant African Americans in Pittsburgh and the U.S. It was the early home of Mary Cardwell Dawson's National Negro Opera Company, later serving as the home of Pittsburgh's local "Guild." It also served as apartment to famous African Americans who visited to the city and were not allowed to stay in other parts of the city. Though it has suffered deterioration in the long years since then it remains a monument to the accomplishments of the black community.

### Ownership History

The property on which the house now stands originally belonged to a Samuel Chadwick, Dr. John A Wilson and his wife Sarah Wilson, who were from what was then called East Liberty Village. The property itself was in Collins Township (Now the Homewood/Lincoln-Larimer Neighborhoods) the 21<sup>st</sup> Ward. They sold the land to Andrew Woolslayer for \$2,570 in 1865, and he sold it in 1868 for \$3,500 to a John F. Wilharm. He and his wife Johanna M. Wilharm held on to the property for next 22 years until they finally sold it to George Shafer in 1890. Shafer and his wife Lizzie Shafer bought the land for \$5,750, and is believed to have constructed the Queen Anne style home c.1894, on what was then called Spencer Street.

Shafer and his wife lived in the home until the early 20s, when he passed away. Mrs. Shafer inherited and sold the home to a partnership of three buyers in 1924. The three buyers, Flora M. Fornao, William Lampertdorfer, and Tillie E. Butler bought home and the 3 surrounding acres for \$15,000. Around this time Spencer Street was renamed Apple Street as it is still known to this day. The 3 partners would own the home until the 1930s.

A major change came in the early the late 1920s to early 1930s when wealthy African Americans like Robert L. Vann and others began buying properties within the Homewood, which at the time was still mostly white neighborhood. Among these included William A. "Woogie" Harris, who bought the home in 1930 for \$12,000. Harris, the older brother of the renowned Pittsburgh photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, owned Crystal Barbershop at 1400 Wylie Avenue in the Hill District. He and his partner Gus Greenlee had in the 1920s become the major figures in the numbers racket of the city. Harris used the barbershop on Wylie Avenue as a front for this very lucrative business (it has since been torn down for the Civic Arena construction in the late 1950s to early 1960s).

Woogie, along with his wife, Ada B., lived in the home during the more exciting years of the house, in contrast with its earlier "quiet" years. It was Harris who rented the upper floors to Mary Cardwell Dawson so that the National Negro Opera Company, which she founded in Pittsburgh in 1941, could rehearse. Mrs. Dawson had originally rehearsed in a building on Frankstown Ave. in East Liberty (since torn down) with the Cardwell Dawson Choir, before moving to Apple Street. Records indicate that Mrs. Dawson lived on 146 East 20<sup>th</sup> Street, in Homestead along with her husband Walter, the home they purchased after her return from college in Boston where they met.

The Dawsons did not live there every long, as Washington, D.C. became the new center of the NNOC after the couple moved there to a new home at 1037 Evarts Street, NE after Walter was offered a job in the city. Mrs. Dawson still maintained a local chapter in Pittsburgh after the move, and created other guilds in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Washington, New York, Detroit, and Red Bank, and Newark, New Jersey.

## Homewood's Early History

Homewood underwent a gradual transformation from a rural community of large estates owned by such notable industrialists as George Westinghouse and Andrew Carnegie in the 1870s to a streetcar suburb in the 1920s. In the 1930s, Homewood was considered to be a "little league of nations" comprised of Italians, Irish, German immigrants, along with a small but growing black population. In 1910, Homewood's population was around 30,000 people, but by the 1940s, it had grown to more than 40,000.

A historical booklet, published by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, provides a description of the common housing types of Homewood during its residential expansion as a middle-class neighborhood in the 1920s and '30s.

The new houses that lined the streets of Homewood-Brushton [during the 1920s] were mass-produced. That did not mean they were not quality products. Working fast but skillfully, building craftsmen constructed solid, substantial houses with durable designs and quality materials. Although largely plain and uniform, the houses reflected the modest and respectable tastes of their owners. [Sapolsky and Roselli, p. 11.]

Homewood's black population was among the first to settle in Homewood, first as servants to the large estates during the period 1860 to 1910, and then as middle class homeowners in the 1920s to 1940s. Their integration into Homewood was not always so smooth.

One of the early "pioneers" of black settlement in Homewood was Robert L. Vann, founder and publisher of the famed black weekly, Pittsburgh *Courier*, who purchased a house on Monticello Street in 1911. Vann ("who was often mistaken for an Indian," according to historian Larry Glasco) and his wife ("who looked white") got along well with their white neighbors in Homewood. In 1917, when Vann bought the house next to him and rented to another black family, white neighbors began what Vann called the "Battle of Monticello Street":

[H]andbills were distributed and meetings were held in which neighbors demanded that Blacks be forced to leave the block. Vann and his Black neighbor refused to budge. Whites began to sell their houses and move to all-white, middle-class areas like Wilksburg and Mount Lebanon. In a few years, Vann's block had become a small Black neighborhood. [Sapolsky and Roselli, p. 17.]

It is likely, then, that Woogie Harris, like Vann before him, also wanted to make a statement about black property ownership in a neighborhood that was otherwise restricted to blacks when he bought 7101 Apple Street in 1930. This trend seems to have continued as Harris purchased additional properties in other areas of the city. A number of photographs in the Teenie Harris collection show Woogie Harris at his house on Frankstown Avenue, in Penn Hills (a borough just outside Pittsburgh, adjacent to Homewood), at a time when the neighborhood was mostly white.

Homewood began to change in the 1950s with the disruption of the lower Hill District under urban renewal. In 1950, the population of Homewood had only been about 25% black, but by 1960, it had risen to over 70%. The 2000 census notes that Homewood is between 94% and 97% black.

The Hopkins Real Estate Atlas of 1939 is the best source for historical ownership information along Apple Street (also called Spencer Street during this time), which is available on the Internet. The atlas reveals the following property owners within the immediate vicinity of the Harris house:

- Directly across the street, occupying smaller lots, the following property owners included: G.A. Brookes, A. Lopez, and G.F.P. Starnes.
- Directly to the west, a property owner is listed as L. Ferrante, et al, representing a large estate.
- To the east of the property, owners of smaller lots are listed as J. Taylor, A. Collaizzi, et ux, B. Ryans, G. DiFiore, and A.R. Watson.

## Accomplishments & Production History of the NNOC

Prior to her establishment of the National Negro Opera Company in 1941, Mary Cardwell Dawson played an instrumental role in the growth of the National Association of Negro Musicians. Founded in Chicago in 1919, the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. is the country's oldest organization dedicated to the preservation, encouragement and advocacy of all genres of the music of African Americans.

Based on her experience at the national level, Madame Dawson established the National Negro Opera Company in an effort to develop more African American opera stars. Her company became the first permanent African-American Opera company in the nation. The company began rehearsing on the third floor, eventually performing its first production "Aida" in October of 1941. The company engaged hundreds of members from the best symphonies orchestras such as Members of Philharmonic Orchestra New York, Pittsburgh Symphony, National Symphony, and others. The company always worked inter-racially, having engaged members from the best local symphonic orchestras regardless of race. In addition to producing *Aida*, it also produced major operas such as *Faust*, *La Traviata*, Verdi's *Il Travatore*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Robert Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses*, and Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga*.

The NNOC was incorporated in 1950 to help raise funds to continue. The company had a national presence performing in the following locations:

- Pittsburgh - Syria Mosque
- Chicago – Civic Opera House & Coliseum
- Washington – Watergate
- New York – 8<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre, Metropolitan Opera House, Madison Square Garden, Carnegie Hall, & Town Hall.
- Washington, D.C.-Griffith Stadium (Washington Senators, formerly the Homestead Grays, where baseball club owner Clark Griffith granted use to the NNOC free of charge for nine straight years)

In fact, Madame Dawson's house at 1037 Evarts Street, NE, is still standing in the Brookland neighborhood.



Photo of 1037 Evarts Street, NE, from the DC tax assessment file (courtesy of Sam Perryman of the Library of Congress).

## Praise for the NNOC

The popular media, both white and black, heaped praise upon the NNOC. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was enthusiastic about Mrs. Dawson saying “The enthusiastic applause accorded her here in the Carnegie Music Hall Wednesday was ample evidence that her efforts to arouse interest in and in support of the music of the masters have been appreciated. Our hat is off to Mary Cardwell Dawson. With the gesture goes our best wishes for many more successes and triumphs.” (*The Pittsburgh Courier*, Saturday, February 28, 1948).

The *Washington Afro-American* also praised saying “The Ordering of Moses’ by the Late Dr. Nathaniel Dett, with arrangements in a pageantry form by Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera Company, given at Shiloh Baptist Church on Nov. 20, was a meritorious presentation.” (*The Washington Afro-American*, November 28, 1950).

By the 1950s, despite the accolades, the company was starting to feel financial strain. In a 1953 letter from Norman Reed of WWDC Radio in Washington, DC, he expresses doubt that Mrs. Vann, who was helping to raise money for the Foundation, could seek a donation from “Mr. Mellon.” Mr. Reed writes to Mrs. Dawson, “I feel certain that Mr. Mellon would turn down any invitation that I might write to him, in behalf of the Foundation, and he might do the same so far as any letter from yourself, or other officers.” He does, however, suggest that Mrs. Dawson approach Congressman Dawson, who “might be persuaded to write to Mr. Mellon.” (Letter from Norman Reed, Program Director of WWDC Radio, Washington, DC, to Mrs. Mary Cardwell Dawson, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1953. Part of the Mary Cardwell Dawson archives, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.)

Still, despite the financial difficulties, the company continued to win critical acclaim. A *Pittsburgh Press* article from 1954 notes, “These days it is difficult and expensive for smaller organizations to produce opera. The NNOC has to be complimented for its worthy aims. However, it had to cut many corners to keep within its modest budget. . . . Balancing these shortcomings was the enthusiasm that infused the principals, chorus, and dancers. They performed with a zest that won the audience’s approval.” (Ralph Lewando, “Negro Opera Produces ‘Aida’”, *Pittsburgh Press*, October 11, 1954. Part of the Mary Cardwell Dawson archives, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.)

*The New York Times* praised the NNOC saying, “Miss Dawson, artistic direction of the event (the opera *Ouanga*), prepared the rousing choir herself. Her determination has been useful to the Negro in the operatic field. Now other doors are opening. But only a few thus far. Miss Dawson’s foundation still has work to do.” (*The New York Times*, Monday, May 28, 1956.)

## Decline of the NNOC

Despite the high profile performances, however, the National Negro Opera Company began to hemorrhage cash and had begun to have trouble attracting donors to its Foundation. Archival information from the Mary Cardwell Dawson archives at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh shows that, even though high profile Pittsburghers were listed as “honorary” members of the National Negro Opera Foundation, Inc., such as Mrs. Clifford Heinz, Mrs. Jesse Vann (wife of *Pittsburgh Courier* founder and publisher, Robert L. Vann), and Mrs. Daisy Lampkin, the organization was having trouble raising the necessary supporting funds to continue its vast and expensive productions.

By the early 1960s, the finances of the National Negro Opera Company had not improved. In a 1961 letter from the Chicago Negro Opera Guild after a reception there noted that “the expenses were great.” It continues: “The amount of \$1,402.71 that was taken, we have only \$303.92 left. This of course is a little surprising to the committee and will be difficult to explain to the public, who are probably under the impression that we cleared a larger sum from the reception.” (Letter from the Chicago Negro Opera Guild, to Mary Cardwell Dawson, March 20, 1961. Part of the Mary Cardwell Dawson archives, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh). Dawson’s death on March 19, 1962, of stroke, also foreshadowed the folding of the NNOC a few months later.

While the National Negro Opera Company dissolved with Madame Dawson's passing in 1962, her spirit lives on with the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association of Negro Musicians, called the Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson MMCD.

In an interview with a chapter member, Neal Hughley, Jr., he believes the chapter bylaws were incorporated in May 1987. He explained that the chapter meets once per month. They host a regional convention each spring, and participate in the national convention in late July-early August. The chapter consists of approximately 15-20 members, including musicians and patrons of the arts.

### **Woogie Harris's Role with 7101 Apple Street, post-1941**

Woogie Harris had, in 1958, begun to rent out the house to well-known black and Latino figures such as Roberto Clemente of the Pittsburgh Pirates, singer Lena Horne, and Pittsburgh Steelers Roy Jefferson, John Nesby, and Marvin Woodson, all of whom had some connection to Harris. Woogie Harris had moved to another house on Frankstown Avenue (Penn Hills) by at least 1941 (the exact date is not known). Historical accounts indicate that Harris rented the house almost continuously from the 1940s through the 1960s.

The Carnegie Museum of Art houses the Teenie Harris photography collection, which provides some information about Harris' other house on Frankstown. Teenie was Woogie's "little" brother and took an impressive array of photographs documenting black life in the 1940s through the '60s. These photographs are documented in the book *One Shot Harris* by Stanley Crouch. Several photographs in the Teenie Harris collection show Woogie Harris in front of his house on Frankstown Avenue.

The Teenie Harris collection reveals much about Woogie Harris that is not captured in print or other sources. Woogie Harris is frequently shown with high profile black celebrities, such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Lena Horne, Joe Louis, and Duke Ellington. This indicates his status as a major operator in the African American community, even if his revenue sources came from the underground.



*Woogie Harris and Duke Ellington sitting with four men, with crowd in background, c. 1930-1950. Teenie Harris Collection, Carnegie Museum of Art, ACCESSION NUMBER: 2001.35.11476.*





Group portrait of seven men standing in front of William "Woogie" Harris' house on Frankstown Road, including Teddy Horne, second from left, boxer Joe Louis, fourth from left, William Harris, III, third from right, William "Woogie" Harris, second from right, c. 1940. Teenie Harris Collection, Carnegie Museum of Art, **ACCESSION NUMBER:** 2001.35.3622.



Self portrait? of Charles "Teenie" Harris posed with foot on running board of car parked in driveway of his brother William "Woogie" Harris' house on Frankstown Avenue, with birdbath in yard and Gus Greenlee's house in background, c. 1940-1942. **ACCESSION NUMBER:** 2001.35.6606





*In back, Gus Greenlee, William "Woogie" Harris, Joe Robinson, Dave Luck, and other men, with Emmanuel "Jew" McPherson, on front right, including numbers runners and business men, gathered around banquet tables for Woogie Harris' birthday party at Crawford Grill, c. 1942. Teenie Harris Collection, Carnegie Museum of Art, ACCESSION NUMBER: 2001.35.5852*

It can be inferred from historical accounts that private homes and other black-run establishments were used by minorities unable to stay at Pittsburgh hotels during the Jim Crow era from approximately 1877 to the 1960s. Larry Glasco's "Double Burden" essay explains that racial discrimination was rampant throughout Pittsburgh in all facets of society.

Middle-class blacks also suffered a wide range of social discrimination. In 1936, a black student at the University of Pittsburgh complained that 'admission to major sports and clubs was not impossible but unbearable and often embarrassing,' while another reported that his application to a student law club had been rejected because of the objection of several southern club members. The Ku Klux Klan in the Pittsburgh region boasted seventeen thousand members in the 1920s, and the police tolerated crime as long as it was black-on-black. In 'white' restaurants blacks found salt in their coffee, pepper in their milk, and overcharges on their bills; in department stores they received impolite service; in downtown theaters they were either refused admission or were segregated in the balcony. Forbes Field, where the Pirates played baseball, confined blacks to certain sections of the stands, and visiting blacks—even those as prominent as W.E.B. DuBois and A. Philip Randolph—could not stay in the city's hotels. Middle-class blacks had difficulty finding integrated housing. . . . Some businesses refused to sell to blacks. . . . Nor were local business associations willing to accept black members, even those who were prominent businessmen and staunch advocates of capitalism. [Glasco, p. 84.]

Harris who still owned the Apple Street home at his death in 1967 left the house to his wife Ada B. She passed away in 1975 caused the house to be sent to orphans court and eventually bought by a Marion E. Slator. Vicki Battles, a niece of Harris, inherited the property after Mrs. Slator's death in 1988. The market value of the home around this time being \$34,592.50, almost three times its worth when Harris originally purchased it in 1930.

## **First Historical Marker Dedication, 1994**

A historical marker was placed at the site on September 25, 1994, thanks to Mrs. Peggy Pierce Freeman, who was an officer in the company, and Patricia Pugh Mitchell of the Heinz History Center (Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania). Dozens of people attended the dedication ceremony, led by the Westinghouse High School marching band and remarks from elected officials and dignitaries, such as Frank Bolden. Both Mrs. Freeman (in 2006) and Mr. Bolden (in 2003) have since passed away.

Mrs. Battles property was sold to the Bank of New York. The building would be neglected and start to deteriorate until its purchase by Jonnet Solomon and Miriam White in 2000. They have founded an organization, The National Negro Opera Co., to fund the restoration of the home as well as a mission statement "to restore and maintain the National Negro Opera House in order to teach culture through arts and music to the youth of the community. When restored, The Opera House will keep the dream started by Madame Mary Caldwell Dawson alive. The house will be the hub of a community based performance group intended to build self-esteem and teach discipline. All activities provided will be designed to develop and nurture a new generation of leaders. We intend to preserve the invaluable history of the musicians that have provided a legacy on the Opera House, Pittsburgh and the world." (Home Page of the National Opera House, <http://www.nationaloperahouse.org>)

## **Second Historical Marker Dedication, 2007**

The PHMC historical marker stood until winter 2007, when it was ripped down in a car accident. The Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh stepped in to apply for a replacement marker. The marker was replaced on May 2, 2007, and a re-dedication ceremony was held on May 3, 2007. Approximately 75 people attended, including a number of elected officials, historians, PHMC officials, and other dignitaries. Selections sung by the National Negro Opera Company were sung by the Renaissance City Women's Choir.

## **Conclusion**

The house at 7101 Apple Street represents the cultural sophistication of African Americans and the influence of Pittsburgh's black community on the nation in the performing arts, as well as the company's role in binding the black community of Pittsburgh. It is important to not the significance of the house and need for the preservation efforts that Mrs. Solomon and Mrs. White have begun. Consideration must be given to Woogie Harris and the wealth he used for the benefit of the community as well as Mrs. Dawson and her Choir's many awards. Even the company she created that ended up helping to bring down the color barriers in the performing arts, as well as establish a generation of talented black & white performers. To lose this home would be a devastating blow not only to the black community but to every community within the Pittsburgh area.

## 9. SIGNIFICANCE

The *Pittsburgh Code of Ordinances, Title 11, Historic Preservation, Chapter 1: Historic Structures, Districts, Sites and Objects* lists ten criteria, at least one of which must be met for Historic Designation. Describe how the structure, district, site, or object meets one or more of these criteria. (Attach extra pages if necessary.)

2. *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspect of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.*

The National Negro Opera House is significant due to two key figures: Woogie Harris and Mary Cardwell Dawson. They both had a profound influence and effect on the Black Community Mrs. Dawson's being on a National level, and Woogie Harris's being more on a local neighborhood as well as on a city level but both important to the social development of Pittsburgh's black community.

**Mary Lucinda Cardwell Dawson** (February 13, 1894-March 19, 1962) the eldest daughter of James and Elizabeth Cardwell, was originally from Meridian, North Carolina. The Cardwell family moved to Munhall most likely in the 1910s, during the Great Migration, settling at 146 East 20<sup>th</sup> Street, a house that still stands today (and is currently still owned by Mary Cardwell Dawson's niece, Barbara Edwards Lee). The local church and piano lessons at home developed her love for singing as well as music. After graduating from High School, she entered the New England Conservatory of Music, one of the nation's most prestigious musical colleges in Boston.

Madame Dawson was introduced to Mr. Walter ("Uncle Bob") Dawson in Boston by Jester Hairston, the author of "Amen," among other songs (according to Wikipedia, Hairston dubbed "Amen" for Sidney Poitier in "Lillies of the Field"). Hairston lived in Homestead and was a roommate of Walter Dawson in Boston at Wentworth Institute of Technology (Hairston went to Tufts). Madame Dawson was in Boston attending the New England Conservatory of Music at the time (the University of Pittsburgh refused to accept African Americans).

After graduating Mrs. Dawson first went to the Chicago Musical College and a studio school operated by the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York to further her studies. She married her husband, Walter M. Dawson on June 24, 1927. Madame Dawson eventually returned to Pittsburgh and became active in the musical life of Pittsburgh in the late 1920s and 1930s.

The Dawsons first lived on Frankstown Avenue in East Liberty in a structure that has since been demolished, with Mr. Dawson's electrical repair shop occupying the building's street level and Mary Cardwell Dawson's School of music occupying the second floor. Mrs. Dawson also began to direct a number of black choirs that sang classical pieces, her brother Harold and sister Catherine also performed in the choir. In 1931 she organized a local National Association of Negro Musicians in Pittsburgh, holding meetings at her school. She also directed a huge ensemble of 500 singers, The Cardwell Dawson Choir, who won national awards in 1935 and 1937, and then went on to perform at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

In 1938, Mrs. Dawson was elected president of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), the nation's most prominent organization of African-American musicians. It was around this time that a national scandal occurred, in which Marian Anderson was refused permission to sing in Constitution Hall by the current manager in 1939. Sol Hurok, Anderson's Manager, had tried to rent Washington DC's Constitutional Hall and was told there were no dates available but when a rival manager asked he was told that there were openings. The hall's director told Hurok that "No Negro will ever appear in this hall while I am manager."

The raw public outraged, protest of famous musicians, and resignation of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who owned the hall, forced the Hall to not only allow Mrs. Anderson to sing within it but also to desegregate the seats. This is when Mrs. Dawson realized that opportunities for black performers in the world of white opera production were few. It was after receiving

public acclaim for her production of Verdi's "Aida," at the 1941 annual meeting of the NANM, that she was convinced that African-American singers needed a company that would provide them with the opportunities they were deprived of by segregation.

### **Founding of the National Negro Opera Company**

It was at the property on Frankstown Avenue that Mary Cardwell Dawson started the National Negro Opera Company in 1941 as the first black opera company in the nation, according to a 2007 interview with her niece, Barbara Edwards Lee (Mrs. Lee also served as National Secretary for the Company). During that same year, needing additional space, Madame Dawson began to rent the house on Apple Street from William A. "Woogie" Harris, who was a big numbers man in Pittsburgh. According to Mrs. Lee, Madame Dawson and Walter Dawson lived at the house on Apple Street, as well as ran the Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson School of Music from their house.

The National Negro Opera Company (NNOC) began its illustrious career in Pittsburgh. On August 29, 1941, the company gave its first performance, Verdi's Aida at Pittsburgh's Syria Mosque. The production costing an equivalent of \$100,000 by today's standards and featuring several prominent soloists including Diva La Julia Rhea as the title role, along with the Cardwell Dawson Choir, and other local musicians and choir members from many of Pittsburgh's black churches.

The company immediately won critical rave reviews. "[W]e have rarely heard so impressive a chorus in all [our] opera experience," wrote the music critic for the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegram*. The *Pittsburgh Courier's* P.L. Prattis tells us that "Tickets at the door did not pay for all of this. Donations from all over the land helped to pay. We must continue to pay. You must see and hear this opera. It is a stunning retort to your critics."

The Dawsons lived at the house on Apple Street for two years and moved out in 1943. Mr. Dawson earned recognition as a master electrician during the construction of Aliquippa Terrace 1 and 2 (one of the nation's first public housing projects in Pittsburgh's Hill District) and was recruited to Washington, DC to work for the government. However, Mrs. Lee says that the government didn't realize Mr. Dawson was black, and, once meeting him, relegated him to cleaning fans and doing other demeaning tasks. He filed an EEOC lawsuit (one of the first at the time) and either settled out of court or dropped the suit (Mrs. Lee wasn't clear how it was resolved).

Interestingly, it was around this same time that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had recruited Robert L. Vann, founder and publisher of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, to DC to be an assistant to the Attorney General (Vann was largely responsible for turning the black vote away from Republicans in support of Democrats during the Great Depression--the statement, "turn Lincoln's portrait to the wall," is attributed to Vann). It's possible that Vann may have been involved in Walter Dawson's suit in some way, but it's just speculation.

The Dawsons' move to Washington, DC, was by no means the end of the company's presence in Pittsburgh. It not only supported a local guild in Pittsburgh but also in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Washington, New York, Detroit, and Red Bank and Newark, New Jersey. For the next twenty years, Mrs. Dawson worked tirelessly to promote African-American participation in and appreciation of opera. She would make frequent return trips to Pittsburgh for fundraising missions or to produce operas staged at the Syria Mosque.

### **Founding of the National Negro Opera Foundation**

In 1950, the National Negro Opera Foundation (NNOF) was incorporated to help raise funds to sustain the NNOC. The company produced major operas including: *Faust*, *La Traviata*, as well as black composer Robert Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses* which was performed in Pittsburgh in 1946, and was performed more often than any other work, Clarence Cameron White's (another black composer) *Ouanga*, which was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, becoming the first black opera company there. In 1955 internationally renowned contralto Marian Anderson had become the first African American to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Shortly thereafter, one of Mary Cardwell Dawson's

protégés, Robert McFerrin, Sr., (father of contemporary musician Bobby McFerrin) became the first permanent African-American member of the Metropolitan cast.

This was both a blessing and a curse as more black opera performers followed suit performing with white opera companies after color bar was broken. This forced the NNOC to cut back on its productions due to this lack of performers and dwindling support from the black community. The NNOC managed to remain active through 1961, still struggling to pay the expenses it incurred, the Dawson's often paying the bills out of their own pockets. A fatal heart attack Dawson suffered in Washington, D.C. in 1962 spelled the end of the NNOC. Without an endowment, major government support, or private sponsors, the National Negro Opera Company folded soon afterwards.

### **Postscript on Barbara Edwards Lee**

While in Washington, DC, Dawsons lived at 1037 Evarts Street, NE, at least until Madame Dawson's death in 1962. Barbara Lee lived in Pittsburgh until 1948, when she graduated from Allderdice High School. But instead of facing rejection from the white establishment in searching for a job, she moved to DC to live with the Dawsons and began a close working relationship with Madame Dawson as the National Secretary for the National Negro Opera Company. Mrs. Lee acted as the spokesperson and press agent for Madame Dawson, and traveled to all of the cities where the NNOC performed. Mrs. Lee also sang in some of the performances.

According to Mrs. Lee, Immediately following Madame Dawson's death, while her house was still in legal limbo over ownership (Mr. Dawson had died shortly thereafter), people apparently would just walk into her house and take things from her closets, including clothes, photographs, and other documents. Some of these same people wore Madame Dawson's hats to her funeral in the ultimate sign of disrespect. Fortunately, Mrs. Lee stepped in to stop the "raping" of this famous woman's house and did manage to recover many of the archives which are now in three places: the Library of Congress, the Heinz History Center, and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. Mrs. Lee still has some files and a few photos, but the bulk of her collection is stored in the archives.

### **History of Willam A. "Woogie" Harris and the Rise and Fall of the Numbers in Pittsburgh**

In Pittsburgh during the 1920s through the 1950s, African Americans' capital network took the form of the numbers (an illegal, underground lottery), which was consolidated and controlled by two prominent figures in the community, William Augustus "Gus" Greenlee and William "Woogie" Harris (1896-1967).

The rise of the numbers racket in African American communities across America (not just Pittsburgh) was a response to Jim Crow laws that prevented blacks from gaining access to capital, such as from a bank (nearly all were white-owned). In response, African Americans set up their own, informal borrowing networks, often capitalized by "underground" operations, such as gambling. But the capital that was consolidated, however illegally, was used for legitimate purposes, such as to open a business, own a home, or for education.

Profits from the numbers helped Greenlee and Harris establish a number of legitimate institutions that served as cornerstones to Pittsburgh's black community: the Pittsburgh Crawfords Negro League team and the Crawford Grill (both owned and operated by Greenlee) and the Crystal Barber Shop, which was owned and operated by Woogie Harris. Both men operated their numbers scheme from these businesses, which were originally located in the Lower Hill District, but were demolished for construction of the Civic Arena (the second Crawford Grill still stands at 2141 Wylie Avenue in the Middle Hill).

Woogie Harris's Crystal Barber Shop, located at 1400 Wylie Avenue, was demolished for the Civic Arena construction. (*African American Survey*, p. 134.)



Exterior view of William "Woogie" Harris' Crystal Barber Shop and Billiard Parlor, c. 1930-1950. Teenie Harris Collection, Carnegie Museum of Art, **ACCESSION NUMBER:** 2001.35.9078.

In an interview with Vernell A. Lillie, professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh's Africana studies program, Bonnie Pfister of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* writes:

The Crawford Grill "represents all of those substitute things that black folks have to do for themselves. Greenlee and [co-owner William] Robinson in some instances became the bankers for black people in Pittsburgh and on the Hill," Lillie said. "They made their money probably from the numbers racket, but they turned that money into something very positive.

"If anybody wanted to buy a house, they could not go to Mellon Bank or Dollar Savings. They had to go to old man Greenlee, or to Robinson," she added. "And people paid them back. They respected that these men -- who made their monies from them -- were willing to help in their development."

The daily number was tied to the closing number of stocks of the New York Stock Exchange. The numbers game was played when a person chose a three digit number, if the number chosen matched the predetermined number for the day, the player won. The organizations that ran the number racket paid players on 500 to 1 odds. Therefore if a person bet a dime they could win up to fifty dollars.

The numbers brought revenue into the community that was much needed at the time. In an interview with Charles "Teenie" Harris, brother of "Woogie" Harris, Ralph Lemuel Hill reports that Dick Gafney brought numbers to Pittsburgh from New York. It was initially strictly African-American. Dick Gafney gave the business to Gus Greenlee, who then brought in Woogie Harris. By 1925, Woogie Harris was running a profitable numbers empire that eventually employed up to 4,000 people and was based at the Crystal Barber Shop in the Hill District.

Teenie Harris (Woogie's little brother, and famed photographer) served as a numbers runner. Initially he started by picking up approximately \$1.75 a day in numbers from McKees Rocks. Within six months the daily amount had jumped to as much as \$400 a day. The numbers importance especially seen during the



Great Depression, one penny could win \$7. Winnings were used to pay for rent, groceries and other necessities, but losses could be devastating.

Led by Greenlee and Harris, the numbers racket in Pittsburgh grew to outsized proportions. According to the Negro League Baseball Players Association's website, the Harris-Greenlee numbers ring was one of the largest gambling operations in the country at its height in the 1930s and '40s.

In addition to the Crawfords, [Greenlee] also owned his own ballpark, a famous nightclub (the Crawford Bar & Grill), and a stable of boxers including light-heavyweight champion John Henry Lewis. Greenlee and William "Woogie" Harris, are credited with introducing the numbers racket to Pittsburgh in 1926 (*Pittsburgh Press*, February 10, 1936) and ran one of the largest and most complex gambling networks of the period. They controlled almost a hundred numbers banks, each with its own specified territory (*Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, July 8, 1982). In total the Harris-Greenlee operation employed about 5,000 people.

Another page on the website contends that "Greenlee's profits from his business ventures helped in the purchase of a new 22 seat bus and the development of Greenlee Field, a first-class facility seating 6,000 at a cost of \$100,000."

Gus Greenlee and Woogie Harris were known for their largesse and there are stories they gave people money for rent and/or for food. Because banks would not loan money to African-Americans, Gus and Woogie loaned money so lawyers and doctors could open up offices. The numbers writers also supported political campaigns, civic events, African-American boxers and sports teams. The numbers also financed Greenlee Field, the first black owned field (which has since been torn down).

It was 1941 when he began to rent the house to Mary Cardwell Dawson and her newly founded National Negro Opera Company. He would later in the 1950s begin to rent the rooms to such names as Roberto Clemente of the Pittsburgh Pirates, singer Lena Horne, and Pittsburgh Steelers Roy Jefferson, John Nesby, and Marvin Woodson, who spent time in the house because they were restricted from rooming in hotels or apartments in other parts of the city.

The numbers racket crashed due in part to three factors: federal government involvement on organized crime, the fall of racial barriers, and the rise of the Italian Mafia-controlled gambling market. Many of the organizers were arrested for income tax evasion on the federal government's nationwide crackdown on organized crime and gambling. In essence, the government closed down many of the lucrative "business" men that kept the numbers business operating, at least in the African American community.

In addition, the increasing integration of society unraveled many African American networks as blacks moved away and neighborhoods changed. Larry Glasco writes in "Double Burden," that "[t]he fall of such barriers, ironically, undermined some black institutions. Following the integration of major league baseball, professional black teams withered away, including the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays. The Pittsburgh *Courier* followed a similar trajectory: as white papers included more news about blacks, the *Courier's* circulation dropped until it was bought by Chicago interests in the mid-1960s." (Glasco, pp. 93-94.)

Another reason for the decline of African Americans in the numbers racket seems to point to the rise of the Italian Mafia-controlled illegal gambling operation in southwestern Pennsylvania. By the late 1950s, Mafia-controlled gambling had become a powerful force in the Pittsburgh region, particularly in East Liberty, a neighborhood adjacent to Homewood, where Harris's house on Apple Street stood. According to a 2006 article in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, one mob boss, Michael James Genovese "was born and reared in East Liberty, where he once controlled the numbers racket, according to a report by the defunct Pennsylvania Crime Commission."

According to the article, "In November 1957, Genovese was part of the Pittsburgh contingency that attended a notorious summit of mob bosses from across the country in Apalachin, N.Y., according to the

crime commission.” This date would correspond with Woogie Harris’ decision to begin renting the house out to people like Lena Horne, Roberto Clemente, and others in 1958.

The article continues:

Genovese took over the Pittsburgh clan, one of 24 original La Cosa Nostra families in the U.S., when LaRocca died in 1984.

Under Genovese’s reign, the Pittsburgh Family dominated illegal gambling in Western Pennsylvania, the panhandle of West Virginia and eastern Ohio, the crime commission said. It was a major drug trafficker in Pittsburgh and was heavy into loansharking, scams and theft.

Age and federal prosecutors began catching up with organized crime in Pittsburgh by the early 1990s. Charles “Chucky” Porter, who was Genovese’s right-hand man, and Louis Raucci Sr., were indicted by a federal grand jury in March 1990 on charges including distribution of narcotics, extortion, conspiracy to commit murder, robbery, gambling and racketeering.

Therefore, as the African American-controlled numbers grew in power and influence, so did the desire for others to join in on the profit-taking. But the deaths of Gus Greenlee in 1952 and Woogie Harris in 1967 marked the end of the black-controlled gambling empire both had built up. Their passing corresponded with the seizure of financial power by white-controlled interests and the decline of racial barriers that allowed blacks to access capital from the white establishment, at least in principle.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the interview with Mrs. Lee underscores the importance of Pittsburgh as a major influence in the nation's music and artistic development, and reinforces the true power that the city's African American population had nationwide during the 1920s through the '40s. The interview also highlighted how closely intertwined Pittsburgh's black community was with those in DC and other cities.

Not only did Pittsburgh produce Madame Dawson during this period, but also Robert L. Vann; Woogie Harris; two of the nation's best Negro League teams (the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays--the Grays moved to DC and became the Senators); the nation's first state speaker of the house, K. Leroy Irvis; entertainers, such as Ahmad Jamal, who was taught by Madame Dawson at the house on Apple Street; as well as a host of physicians, lawyers, artists, and others who contributed mightily to our nation's prominence.

It becomes essential, then, to recognize and preserve the historic sites that remain. Physical sites are invaluable educational tools to teach the next generation about the great things that happened in the past. Where no sites exist because they were torn down from urban renewal or neglect, it's as if history was erased or didn't exist at all.

Sometimes, the only history we have left is the rapidly fading memories of the elderly, who possess within them not only the stories of the past, but life's lessons too. This makes it all the more important for organizations like ours to capture their stories and preserve the physical remnants of a time that many have forgotten and our young people may never know.

*7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.*

The house on Apple Street served as a social center for the city's African American community. The house's role as the first home of the National Negro Opera Company helped to establish an African-American presence in opera, which had previously been very much segregated field during the early to mid 1900s. This company gave hope and a chance to those African Americans (as well as whites) that wanted

to perform in the opera, with many numerous performances from its creation in 1941 to Madame Dawson's death in 1962. It was during this time, the 1940s through the 1960s, that the house served as a major social center for African American musicians, such as Ahmad Jamal and Lena Horne, as well as sports legends like Roberto Clemente.

Ultimately, the National Negro Opera Company helped break down the color barrier in opera, forcing white-owned companies to recognize black talent and hire many black performers. Many African Americans owe their current ability to become professional opera singers, dancers, or just a performer in general, to Mary Cardwell Dawson and the work of the National Negro Opera Company.

*And*

*10. Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.*

The distinct Queen Anne-styled home stands out as a prime antique of the Homewood neighborhood's past (technically, the property sits on the border with Lincoln-Lemington and Homewood North). The Homewood area has a very large number of smaller residential buildings spread out through its neighborhoods, but none are as grand as the house on Apple Street. As one of the largest, and only, Queen Anne Victorians in Homewood, the property occupies an entire city block. Many of the nearby buildings have been turn down or simply neglected.

The house itself is very unique with its round turret on the eastern side, a feature that is not duplicated in the neighborhood, and sweeping wrap-around porch. Also the view from the inside of the turret is one of the best within the city, with expansive views of Homewood, Point Breeze, East Liberty, Oakland, and the backside of the Hill District. This view is possible due the where the house is located, high on a terraced hillside.

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Pitz, Marylynne, "1920 to 1939: From Speakeasies to Harlem Nights" *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 18, 2004, [http://www.nlbpa.com/greenlee\\_gus.html](http://www.nlbpa.com/greenlee_gus.html). visited Monday, July 2, 2007

## **Interviews**

Interview with Barbara Edwards Lee (niece and personal secretary to Madame Dawson), West Mifflin, Pa., July 17, 2007. Captured on digital video and available on DVD.

Phone interview with Neal Hughley, Jr., on October 3, 2007. 412-731-6441, [liliahuguley@msn.com](mailto:liliahuguley@msn.com).

## **Additional Resources**

Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds, for research relating to property ownership of 7101 Apple Street.

Archives of Mary Cardwell Dawson, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Main Branch, Oakland.

Edwards Lee, Barbara, 412-469-2828.

Johnson, Dr. James, Afro-American Music Institute, 412-241-7422.

Love, Ken, Filmmaker (682-4948) or cell: 412-760-6689.

Moore, Dustella, Current President, 412-247-4425.

Perryman, Sam, Music Specialist, U.S. Library of Congress, 202-707-8454, [sper@loc.gov](mailto:sper@loc.gov).

Spaulding, George, first president and incorporator, Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson MMCD division of the National Association of Negro Musicians, 412.241.1881.

Smith, Eric Ledell, Associate Historian, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission "Mary Cardwell Dawson: Black Opera Pioneer," a speech at the Rededication of the Pennsylvania state historical marker commemorating the National Negro Company, Pittsburgh, May 3, 2007.

Vivian Young, daughter of Peggy Pierce Freeman, who worked for Madame Dawson, 412-871-0292.

## **10. NOTIFICATION/CONSENT OF PROPERTY OWNER(S)**

YPA has secured the support of Jonnet Solomon & Miriam White for this nomination.



**11. NUMBER AND SUBJECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHS INCLUDED WITH THE NOMINATION FORM**



*William "Woogie" Harris' house, 7101 Apple Street in Homewood, c. 1950-1970  
Source: Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive*



*Mary Cardwell Dawson (undated photo)  
Source: Barbara Edwards Lee*



*From left to right, Geraldine or Philistine Bobo, William "Woogie" Harris, Cab Calloway, John Henry Lewis, and Joe Louis in tuxedos, c. 1940  
Source: Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive*



*William "Woogie" Harris wearing cap standing on street, c. 1945-60  
Source: Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive*



*Connie Harris, William Harris, III, Ada Harris, William "Woogie" Harris with baby, Marion Harris Hall, George Hall, Sr. in front of 7604 Mulford Street, c. 1942  
Source: Carnegie Museum of Art, Teenie Harris Archive*





7101 Apple Street, May 2, 2007  
Photo: Dan Holland



Installation of new replacement PHMC marker, May 2, 2007.  
Photo: Dan Holland





*First PHMC marker dedication, Sept. 25, 1994.*



*Marker re-dedication, May 3, 2007.  
Photo: Rachael Kelley*

## **12. LIST OF SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED WITH THE NOMINATION FORM**

See "Sources."

### **NOMINATION FORM PREPARED BY:**

Name Dan Holland, Founder and Chair, Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh

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