

William Dawson: An Introduction

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Mr. Dawson and Me

What a privilege to interview William Dawson five times between 1979 and 1981, to write the seminal work on his life, and to share his educational influence. When I began doctoral studies in music education, I had already selected Dawson as my dissertation topic and wrote to ask if I could visit to gather information to write about him. In his response, Dawson invited me to his home in Tuskegee, Alabama, yet deflected the importance of the project by saying, “I don’t know what you’re going to write about!”¹

During each day-long visit, I spent hours conversing with Dawson and feverishly writing notes, as he would not permit me to audio record our sessions. He stopped his sharing only briefly for us to sit down to a tasty lunch prepared by his wife, Cecile,

before delving again into his memory and the personal archives housed in his home. Myriad copies of years of correspondence, historical artifacts, and other ephemera were a treasure-trove of documentation of the extraordinary and successful life of a performer, pedagogue, and composer.

Once the dissertation manuscript was complete, I asked Dawson to peruse the content, who then shared the work with his former teacher at Tuskegee Institute and subsequent colleague, Bess Bolden Walcott, not only for grammar suggestions, but historical accuracy. Walcott, who was hired out of Oberlin College in 1908 by Tuskegee Founder, Booker T. Washington, was ninety-five years old when I met her and earned her approval. Even then, the nonagenarian was still “at the top of her game.”²

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Photo courtesy of William Levi
Dawson papers, Stuart A. Rose
Manuscript, Archives, and Rare
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My association with William Dawson continued off and on through 1986 when I met him at various events and appearances, specifically ACDA conferences. Following his death in 1990, I intended to publish my dissertation, but a teaching career of over forty years always seemed to get in the way. However, after spending the past five years engaged in archival research, the first volume dedicated solely to the accomplishments of this iconic American composer is finally in print as of March 2023. The following introduction to William Dawson's life and work comes primarily from that book, *William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator* (University Press of Mississippi).

1899-1930: Birth and Life

Born in Anniston, Alabama, on September 26, 1899, just three months prior to the start of the twentieth century, William Dawson entered a world that immediately captured his ears, his attention, and his ambition. Dawson emulated the people in his world, desiring to build skills to be a carpenter, a brakeman on a train, a brick mason...nothing escaped his vision. In my interviews with him, he spoke often of his desire to “be something.”³

Mostly, he was enthralled with music and musicians, causing Dawson to realize he wanted to become a musician. His search for not only a basic education but also a music education locally was quite a challenge. And, his father believed that hard work—not education—would enable his son to be successful in a world that segregated African Americans from white folks, did not offer equal opportunities for those of his race, and subjected Black men and women to Jim Crow laws.

When Dawson heard of the work of Booker T. Washington, who built an elementary and secondary school in Tuskegee, Alabama, he vowed to go there. Indeed, at age thirteen, Dawson rode the train right onto the Tuskegee campus, took advantage of the myriad music-making opportunities, and was mentored by Washington, who took a strong interest in the young man.⁴

Following graduation from Tuskegee in 1921, Dawson accepted the position of band director at Kansas Vocational College in Topeka for one year, then took the job as music director at Lincoln High School in

Kansas City, Missouri. While continuing to teach at Lincoln High School, Dawson did not forsake his personal quest to complete a bachelor's degree in music. Seeking to enroll at the Horner Institute of Fine Arts in Kansas City, the registrar informed him that the school's policy did not allow African Americans to attend classes. Dawson responded that he wished to study, not attend classes, and as such, Dawson was allowed to study alone with many faculty members, only after the school had closed for the day. At commencement in 1925, William Dawson was not allowed to sit with the graduating class but was relegated to the balcony. Even when the attendees erupted in tumultuous applause following the performance of his composition, *Trio in A for violin, cello, and piano*, Dawson was not allowed to stand and acknowledge the acclaim.⁵

In the spring of 1925, the Lincoln High School Choir was invited to sing at the Music Supervisors Convention in Kansas City, and music publishers swarmed Dawson following the impressive performance of several of the spirituals he arranged. In late 1925, the H. T. FitzSimons Company of Chicago published Dawson's first choral piece, *King Jesus is A-Listening*, which was quickly followed by, *Talk About A Child That Do Love Jesus*, and *My Lord, What A Mourning*.⁶

After resigning from Lincoln High School in 1925, Dawson left Kansas City to study with Adolph Weidig in pursuit of a master's degree in composition from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Prior to the completion of his degree, Dawson met pianist Cornella Lampton; they fell in love and soon married. Cornella, who was the first woman to earn a music degree at Howard University, was in Chicago continuing her piano study with Percy Grainger. Tragically, after a year of marriage, Cornella died from complications following an appendectomy. Dawson set the lyrics of the Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem, “Out in the Fields,” to music in memory of Cornella.⁷

With his master's degree in hand, Dawson remained in Chicago, a city that seemed to bustle with the far-reaching effects of the Harlem Renaissance. Immersed in musical pursuits, he worked for two music publishers, conducted a church choir, continued study with composers of note in the “Windy City,” played first trombone in the Chicago Civic Orchestra, played trombone with Charlie “Doc” Cook's Doctors of Syn-



Photo 1. *The Tuskegee Choir at Carnegie Hall, February 8, 1933. Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee University. Used with permission.*

copation jazz ensemble, and amassed a choir and band in August 1929 to audition to win a spot as the Black performance group for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. His ensembles were chosen to perform at the fair.⁸

1930-1955: Faculty Member at Tuskegee

The president of Tuskegee Institute, Dr. Robert Moton, summoned Dawson back to his alma mater in 1930 to become the director of the school of music as a part of Tuskegee's expansion into a four-year college. Dawson was much revered and highly sought after by the college; his salary at Tuskegee was second only to the president.⁹

Much like the Jubilee Singers at Fisk University, he wasted no time in putting Tuskegee on the map with his incredible Tuskegee Choir, who sang Dawson's own arrangements. By using the music created by enslaved African Americans as the basis for his inspiration, Dawson harmonized and utilized compositional techniques in crafting exciting choral arrangements that thrilled and wowed audiences and music critics alike. Within two years, Dawson succeeded in securing a spot on the

program of the Grand Opening of Radio City Music Hall in NYC in 1932-33.

Imagine taking 110 singers via train to New York to spend a month in the midst of the Great Depression that overtook the nation. While there, the Tuskegee Choir sang a birthday concert for incoming president Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his residence and secured a date to perform in Carnegie Hall (Photo 1). On the way back to Alabama, the choir sang for outgoing president Herbert Hoover in the White House.¹⁰

Once back in Tuskegee, Dawson put the finishing touches on his extended work, *Negro Folk Symphony*. Intent on making certain the world knew that a Black man had composed a symphony, Dawson included the word Negro in the title. As long as I knew him, he used and defended "Negro" as the appropriate word to refer to members of his race. He noted that this was a common word across all the romance languages used to name African Americans, and as such, he would not use "Black," "Afro-American," or "African American."

World-renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski of the internationally famous Philadelphia Orchestra chose Dawson's symphony for premiere in November 1934 in both Philadelphia and at Carnegie Hall

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in NYC (Photo 2). During the performance, the audience broke with custom and applauded between movements. At the conclusion of the symphony, the standing ovation continued so long that Stokowski ran off stage and dragged Dawson back to acknowledge the response. Marvelous acclaim by critics was followed by an avalanche of cards, letters, and telegrams received by Dawson from concertgoers and from many across the nation who listened via radio.¹¹

Stokowski later recorded the *Negro Folk Symphony* with the American Symphony Orchestra. Recently, there has been a resurgence in the performance of Dawson's only extended work. The ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra recorded the symphony in 2020, and the Boston Symphony performed Dawson's orchestral composition during concerts March 9-11, 2023. And, the Chicago Civic Orchestra, of which Dawson was an alumnus, performed the masterpiece January 7-8, 2024.

Ever multitasking, while tidying-up the score of his symphony Dawson commenced a long-distance courtship of Cecile De Mae Nicholson, a faculty member at Morris Brown College in Atlanta. The couple originally met in Kansas City, reconnected several years later, and eventually married in September 1935.¹²

During Dawson's twenty-five years as director of the Tuskegee Choir, the singers were heard over NBC, CBS, and ABC radio networks from coast to coast. From 1952 to 1955 the Tuskegee Choir sang on television several times, most notably the Ed Sullivan Show. The choir sometimes used pictures taken in the Tuskegee Chapel as a part of advertisement for the choir's radio appearances. One iconic ad for a performance via radio during a broadcast of the Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show from the Tower Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1950 featured the choir seated in the chancel in front of the stained-glass windows that portrayed the history of African American music through spirituals. While the original chapel burned in 1957, the stained-glass window was reconstructed from the original specifications and can be viewed today in the modern structure on campus.¹³

Fulfilling a lifelong dream, Dawson traveled to West



Photo 2. Dawson and Stokowski peruse the score of Dawson's only extended work, *Negro Folk Symphony*. Used with permission.

Africa from December 1952 through February 1953 to experience African music firsthand (Photo 3). While en route to Africa, he stopped in London to hear the Vienna Philharmonic, as well as in Paris to meet Nadia Boulanger and her pupil Howard Swanson. Once in Africa and armed with the first portable reel-to-reel tape recorder, Dawson recorded rhythmic and melodic examples of traditional folk music, which still exist and have recently been digitized. Upon return to Tuskegee, he revised portions of the *Negro Folk Symphony* to provide rhythmic motives he believed more authentically represented his "missing link" to Africa.¹⁴ Following a storied career of conducting, teaching, and composing, William Dawson retired from Tuskegee Institute in 1955 after twenty-five years of service to his alma mater.

1956-1989: Dawson in Retirement

Dawson's own thoughts and research on the subject of Negro Folk Songs appeared in an article in the March 1955 issue of *Etude*. Titled, "Interpretation of the Religious Folk Songs of the American Negro," the essay encompasses the history and growth of this music and discusses supposed oddities in the lyrics. Dawson



Photo 3. Dawson in Africa experiencing African folk music for the first time and recording examples using the first portable reel-to-reel tape recorder, 1953. William Levi Dawson papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Used with permission.

offered an explanation for the language of the enslaved:

It is a mistake to think that the dialect of the Negro is only a crude attempt to pronounce Anglo-Saxon words. Careful examination will reveal that instead, it is an instinctive modification of their harsh and guttural sounds to satisfy his preference for soft and euphonious vocables characteristic of his native African speech. Instead of the diphthongal “I,” he uses “ah”; for the sharp aspirated “th” in “thee,” he uses “de”; for the final “th” in “with,” he says, “wid.”¹⁵

Dawson insisted that those enslaved in America suffered inhuman treatment, yet not a word of hate emerged from the Negro Folk Songs. Rather, the enslaved felt a oneness with Jesus Christ, who bore no malice toward His persecutors.

In 1956, Dawson was invited by the U.S. State Department to travel to Spain as a cultural emissary to conduct his own compositions. The spirituals were to be merged in concert with the music of Spanish Renaissance composer Tomas Luis de Victoria at the behest of Spain’s cultural minister. Dawson’s personal host while in Spain, Antonio Gonzales de la Peña, admitted that leaders of the church as well as choir members in the projected choral workshop locations were skeptical at first about inviting Dawson. Whether the reluctance was due to working with a Black man or attempting to perform African American music in ancient cathedrals was unclear. Yet, in his final report, Peña referred to William Dawson as an ambassador who would take the beautiful Iberian music back to share in America and claimed he left an ineffable mark on the hearts of Spaniards.¹⁶

Dawson remained in demand as a guest conductor for choirs and orchestras for over forty-five years following his retirement from Tuskegee. As early as 1939, well before he left employment at the Institute,

Dawson began accepting invitations to serve as guest conductor for his own works. Yet, a re-designed, retired Dawson rocketed into importance in 1956 as a highly desired conductor for choral festivals, speaking engagements, and choral clinics/workshops both domestically and internationally.¹⁷

In 1986, at my invitation, Dawson appeared as headliner for the first-ever state conference of the Mississippi Chapter of the American Choral Directors Association at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, during which I served as his chauffeur and escort. It was a moving moment when he was introduced with the honor and dignity he deserved, which was in direct

contrast to the guarded reception he and his students bore when he brought the Tuskegee Choir to Mississippi in 1936, fifty years prior. Because it was the law at that time, the flyer announcing the concert included a clause at the bottom indicating that the balcony was reserved for “Negroes.”¹⁸

1990: Dawson Passes Away at 90


Tuskegee University hosted a marvelous ninetieth birthday party September 24, 1989, two days before his actual birthdate. Dawson personally signed copies of the program at the event, during which invited guests and Tuskegeens paid tribute to him through the reading of scripture, singing of hymns, renditions of his spirituals, and honors from state and national officials.

ACDA continued to recognize William Dawson as a gifted and celebrated composer with a post-birthday celebration at the Southern Division Convention a year later in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1990. My article, “William Dawson and the Tuskegee Choir,” appeared in the March 1990 issue of the *Choral Journal*, which coincided with the salute to Dawson “for his excellent achievements in choral music.”¹⁹

Less than two months following the convention tribute, Dawson passed away on May 2, 1990. He had fulfilled a wish in his early childhood to “be something!” The song *There is a Balm in Gilead* seems to sum up William Dawson’s response to life with the words: “Sometimes I feel discouraged, And think my work’s in vain, But then the Holy Spirit, Revives my soul again.”

There is More to Learn about William Dawson

An important goal of the first published volume celebrating the accomplishments of this remarkable African American composer and Alabama native is that the rest of the “good news” about the life and work of William Levi Dawson has yet to be discerned. His extensive collection of papers and ephemera can be found in the Rose Archives at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition, other sources can also be discovered in the Tuskegee University Archives, the

University of Missouri-Kansas City Archives, as well as the Missouri Valley Collection of the Kansas City Public Library. 

NOTES

- ¹ Mark Hugh Malone, *William Levi Dawson: American Music Educator* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 3.
- ² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-16.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-32.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28, 133-134.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-33.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-36.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-60.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93-101.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 61-73.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101-108.
- ¹⁵ William L. Dawson, “Interpretations of the Religious Folk Songs of the American Negro,” *Etude*, March 1955, 11.
- ¹⁶ Malone, *William Levi Dawson*, 121-123.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120-130.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ¹⁹ Mark Hugh Malone, “William Dawson and the Tuskegee Choir,” *Choral Journal*, March 1990, 17-20.