CONTENTS

List of Illustrations xi

INTRODUCTION 1

PART ONE: BROKEN HOME, BEGINNINGS TO 1893

CHAPTER 1. Broken Country 15
CHAPTER 2. Broken Home 47
CHAPTER 3. Public Schooling 77
CHAPTER 4. The Tattler 91
CHAPTER 5. A Superior Gift 110
CHAPTER 6. Career Choices 131
CHAPTER 7. The White City 152

PART TWO: A TRUE SINGER, 1893 TO 1898

CHAPTER 8. Chafing at Life 173
CHAPTER 9. The Bond of a Fellow-Craft 188
CHAPTER 10. Heroine of His Stories 206
CHAPTER 11. A True Singer 217
CHAPTER 12. England as Seen by a Black Man 239
In the October 1914 issue of the *A.M.E. Review*, an author named Alice M. Dunbar (1875–1935) published “The Poet and His Song,” reflecting on the “life and character” of her former husband, the legendary African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906).¹ When they first corresponded in April 1895, she went by the full name of Alice Ruth Moore; she was nineteen years old, he twenty-two. Their epistolary courtship lasted nearly two years, until they became engaged in early February 1897. In March 1898 they married; and in January 1902 they separated abruptly, without having children together. Despite his pleas for forgiveness, which she unfailingly ignored, they never re-united.² In print and in person, turbulence described the six years and nine months of their relationship: infatuation and love, admiration and encouragement, but also suspicion and frustration, exasperation and fury, as well as intimidation and violence.

Even though Alice published “The Poet and His Song” almost nine years after Paul’s death, she retained the surname “Dunbar.”³ In fact, the essay marked her first-ever published study of why Paul perceived the world the way he did. “So if one wishes to get a correct idea of any poet whatever,” she explains at the outset, “he must delve beneath the mere sordid facts of life and its happenings; of so many volumes published in such and such a time; of the influence upon him of this or that author or school of poetry; of the friends who took up his time, or gave him inspiration, and, above all, one must see what the love of Nature has done for the poet.” Alice’s essay seeks to render more human, if more profound and complex, a person she once loved but later came to resent during his lifetime—and after his death in 1906, a person she had eventually come to appreciate. The title “poet laureate of his race,” which Paul assumed during the height of his professional career, underestimated the sophistication of his poetry.⁴

In lyrical prose, Alice describes the poems Paul wrote that best mirrored his unique literary sensibility.⁵ One of these poems was “Sympathy,” published in his fourth book of poetry, *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899). The bird’s cage,
according to Alice, actually referred to the “iron grating of the book stacks in the Library of Congress,” where the “torrid sun poured its rays down into the courtyard of the library and heated the iron grilling of the book stacks until they were like prison bars in more senses than one.” Paul worked at the Library of Congress from September 1897 through October 1898; during this period, a series of illnesses cut short his employment there. (The “dry dust of the dry books . . . rasped sharply in his hot throat,” she remembered.) What had initially been the proverbial job to die for turned into a job that was killing his body and spirit. Being “a poet shut up in an iron cage with medical works” was “ironic incongruity,” Alice wrote. Among the stacks Paul was not a patron but a prisoner; now he “understood how the bird felt when it beat its wings against its cage.”

Alice could very well have been overstating the misery surrounding the nature of Paul’s job in the Library of Congress. Others who witnessed him there tell a different story, suggesting that the Library of Congress, for all its faults as an oppressive work environment, could never truly suppress Paul’s brilliant sense of not only literary time and place but also how distinctive forms of art, such as music and poetry, could converge, stimulate his imagination, and move audiences.

Although its autobiographical basis in Paul’s stint at the Library of Congress may be debatable, the poem “Sympathy” nonetheless testifies in profound, existential ways to the miraculous and transcendent bond between the poet and the world. The poem highlights the “direct ratio” of the poet to sympathy—to the knowledge, as the poem’s speaker puts it, of three refrains: “what the caged bird feels,” “why the caged bird beats his wing,” and “why the caged bird sings.” Paul struggled with the belief that he lived and wrote like a bird trapped in a cage, however gilded it might have been by the acclaim of admirers. The poem would reverberate in the century after its publication, its lyrical poignancy and thematic cogency extended in Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969). In its depiction of how a young black girl could grow and achieve a personal sense of dignity in the face of rampant racism and sexism, Angelou’s autobiography reveals the perennial relevance of Dunbar’s original song: a caged bird beating its wings is the story of the individual imprisoned by societal preconceptions and struggling to escape.

Describing the life and times of Paul Laurence Dunbar requires that we tell this story. Prodigious and prolific, he was a serious professional writer for a total of eighteen years, from 1888 until his death. During this time he released fourteen books of poetry, four collections of short stories, and four novels, a
body of work that showcased his mastery of literary genres—the Western lyric, the Romantic poetry of England, the “Fireside” or “Schoolroom” poetry of the United States, the realism and naturalism of American fiction, the racial uplift of African American literature, and the dialect of informal English. Newspapers and magazines across the country syndicated many of the individual texts in his eighteen books of poems and short stories. Across various mainstream and obscure periodicals, he also published essays on the progress, productivity, and challenges of African Americans from the era of slavery to newfound franchise and freedom in the decades after the Civil War. (For Paul himself, the achievements of his life and literature, whether accurately or not, served as his benchmarks of racial progress.) To wide acclaim, he recited his poems or delivered speeches in private homes, churches, schools, and auditoriums across America’s East Coast and Midwest as well as in England’s cities. And he drafted experimental works, including librettos and drama, that exhibited his prodigious artistic versatility. The quality, breadth, and diversity of his literature inspired countless people around the world.

A biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar, however, cannot be merely a story of the intellectual ideas that informed the way he wrote literature. Nor can it be only an exploration of the mental, emotional, and moral compass by which he oriented himself in the world. It must also recount the wider historical forces that inevitably shaped his personality—the forces that guided the various personal and professional choices that lay before him and that, he believed, would determine the course of his life, career, and legacy. One must tell the full story of an African American who privately wrestled with the constraints of America in the Gilded Age, but who also sought to express or mitigate this strife through the written and spoken word.9

Reared during and after Reconstruction, Paul belonged to a generation of African Americans—of so-called New Negroes—whose parents had been enslaved and who were adjusting to the capitalist modernity of America. It was a time when “the man of letters” had to become “a man of business,” as William Dean Howells—the so-called Dean of American Letters, a renowned critic and writer who had become one of Paul’s most influential patrons—acknowledged in 1893: “unless he sells his art he cannot live, that society will leave him to starve if he does not hit its fancy in a picture, or a poem, or a statue; and all this is bitterly true.”10 But it also was a time when such an edict leaned on an expectation that African Americans who sought to make a living through literary writing had to tailor it to racial stereotypes. Professional opportunities for such writers were limited to certain types of writing, including the depiction of undereducated

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dialect or African Americans in the racist mold of blackface minstrelsy. Autobiographical undertones about how Paul himself faced this conundrum can be found in his poem “The Poet,” included in his 1903 collection *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*:

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
   With, now and then, a deeper note.
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world’s absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
   And Love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.11

Paul resented how much the world underappreciated his literary skills and creativity. The facts corroborate his belief. Critics, editors, publishers, patrons, and fellow writers rarely acknowledged publicly, or even privately, Paul’s ability to experiment with the various traditions of Western poetry in formal English—from the lyric to the ballad, the rondeau to the sonnet—beyond the stereotypical language of African American dialect he likewise happened to know and write so well. To Alice especially, he complained about how these circumstances so unfairly limited him, about how they forced him to bear a burden of racial authenticity more onerous than what any other African American writer of his era had to shoulder.

Nonetheless, and perhaps ironically, Paul overcame these personal reservations and social conditions to write and recite dialect in ways unprecedented in their artistic excellence and commercial success.

To make proper sense of Paul Laurence Dunbar, one has to begin his story well before his birth on June 27, 1872. One must understand the antebellum lives of his parents, Joshua Dunbar and Matilda Murphy, as Kentucky slaves; their separate experiences during the Civil War; their acculturation to the postwar city of Dayton, Ohio, where Paul was born; and their combustible marriage, violent exchanges, and eventual divorce. As Paul matured, he came to embody contradictions while rebelling against the world’s stifling expectations. He tried to be a faithful boyfriend or husband to women, but his wandering eyes
betrayed his pleas of fidelity. Alcoholism afflicted his father and eventually overtook him, too, to the horror or fascination of sober onlookers. Paul enjoyed reading, writing, and reciting literature in formal English, but the commercial vogue for the persona and dialect of the so-called Old Negro, or of the undereducated, docile slave, pressured him at times to change course to improve the sales of his published literature. Racial politics divided the African American intelligentsia into partisan camps either supportive or critical of the industrial ethos of the most famous African American educator at the turn of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington. As Paul’s perspective on racial progress evolved, he would come to support both camps at different times. Under such duress, the conflicted dimensions of Paul’s personality became more manifest. He was a temperamental judge of others’ failings, yet he himself was insecure. Toward the patrons of the white literati he was obsequious, yet with the patriarchs of the black intelligentsia he ingratiated himself. And to multiple women he wrote private letters that alternately expressed extremes of excessive love and merciless condemnation.

The remarkable life and times of Paul Laurence Dunbar break down into three main parts. Against the backdrop of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow segregation, the first section, “Broken Home,” describes the early lives and eventual challenges of Joshua and Matilda, Paul’s parents; the circumstances and consequences of Paul’s birth and his fatal inheritance of Joshua’s virtues and vices; his rearing in Dayton, Ohio, where he entered an entrepreneurial newspaper partnership with his high school classmate Orville Wright, who would later be known, along with his brother Wilbur, as a co-inventor of the first airplane that could achieve controlled, sustained, and powered flight; and the years leading to 1893, when he published his first book, *Oak and Ivy*, and befriended the legendary African American abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Spanning five eventful years, the second section, “A True Singer,” bookends the era when Paul entered his literary prime and tried to grasp what being a professional African American writer meant. Literature authored by African Americans most excited mainstream audiences when it portrayed the stereotypical dialect of slaves, which became the mythical object of white nostalgia once the Emancipation Proclamation liberated 3 million slaves in 1863 and portended the metaphorical disappearance of their racist caricatures and vernacular. This section traces the origin and growth of his infatuation with Alice, leading to their tumultuous courtship and engagement; and it highlights the extent of Paul’s personal and professional reach to the era’s rising political stars.
The final section, “The Downward Way,” begins in 1898 with his marriage to Alice, the joy of which was tempered over time by episodes of his grave illnesses, his confusing negotiations with editors and publishers, his financial obligations to support his mother, and his erratic behavior worsened by an irrepressible and obscene addiction to liquor.

A prominent part of this book involves analyzing Paul’s volatile relationship with Alice, whose own comprehensive biography is long overdue and which accrues more information from the research I have conducted. I plumb his professional networks, which included patrons and politicians on both sides of the so-called color line. White men whom he came to know and admire included the writers James Newton Matthews, James Whitcomb Riley, and William Dean Howells; the medical doctor Henry Archibald Tobey; and Theodore Roosevelt, a government official he revered and reached out to—a gesture that this governor of New York and, later, president of the United States reciprocated. Others in Paul’s orbit were legendary African American intellectuals of his time, including Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington above all, and to a lesser degree the musician Will Marion Cook, the writer James Weldon Johnson, the activist Alexander Crummell, the author Victoria Earle Matthews, and, in England, composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Paul’s countless interactions with editors and publishers, from the renowned Major James Pond and his daughter, Edith, to Frank Dodd of the publisher Dodd, Mead, reveal how he navigated the perks and pitfalls that accompanied his sudden rise to literary celebrity.

In portraying Paul’s life, I attend especially to how broad historical forces shaped his personal, public, and professional identities. Newspapers, magazines, and recitals, in the United States and during his six-month tour of England in 1897, dictated his tactics and strategies to broaden his literary appeal for commercial gain. Political factors in the postwar stability of American society—including the period of Reconstruction (circa 1865–1877), the nomination of William McKinley for president (in 1896), and the gubernatorial and then presidential rise of Theodore Roosevelt (from 1899 to 1901)—played a hand in his access to elite constituencies of readers and sources of political power. The customs of racial taxonomy defined and authenticated his “blackness,” to be sure, while segregationist policies for public interaction between blacks and whites limited his social mobility and his professional opportunities. And he gravitated to the great minds of literature in the extensive library that he built over time and collected in Loafing-Holt, the second-floor study in his final Dayton home, where he died on February 9, 1906.
Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first African American born after slavery—that is, the first modern African American writer—to achieve commercial prosperity and international stature exclusively by his literary works. But he was not just a writer of literature. Although only an occasional librettist and lyricist for musicals, he nevertheless helped achieve two unprecedented milestones in the history of American culture: he wrote the libretto for the first musical with a full African American cast to appear on Broadway, a one-act show called *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk*, which premiered in 1898; and he wrote the lyrics for *In Dahomey*, which debuted in 1902 as the first full-length Broadway musical to be both written and performed by African Americans.

Despite these accomplishments, the blessing and curse of Paul’s celebrity status compelled him to behave in extreme or unpredictable ways, ranging from his poised and gentlemanly decorum during his trip to England to the shameful misbehavior in—to repeat Alice’s lament—“the mere sordid facts of life and its happenings.” Like a poem, the essential meaning of Paul’s life and literature defies easy paraphrase.

Since the late 1960s, academic and public interest in Paul Laurence Dunbar has steadily risen, coinciding with the centennial of his death in 2006 and the sesquicentennial of his birth in 2022. The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States likewise inspired scholars of American history to examine precedent circumstances under which African Americans aspired for high political office and intellectual leadership. Many scholars have gravitated toward Reconstruction, the era lasting roughly from 1865 to 1877, when Dunbar happened to be born and reared and when his early mind matured. During this time, the federal government sought not only to restore to the Union the eleven southern states that allied with the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861–1865) but also to consummate the constitutional franchise of African Americans in the wake of their emancipation from slavery. My biography hinges on the very cultural, political, and ideological implications of Reconstruction for Paul’s phenomenal emergence in the late nineteenth century as a leading writer, intellectual, and spokesperson for his race.

During Reconstruction, so-called Radical Republicans employed a vocabulary of higher law that anchored the arguments for African American franchise to the idealistic republican principles of the nation’s founding almost a century
prior, during the Revolutionary War. Although not unanimous in strategy or conviction, the Radical Republicans objected to the immorality of slavery and its denial of the natural rights of African Americans to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Even though federal emancipation in 1863 undermined slavery, ingrained prejudice after the Civil War perpetuated the constitutional disfranchisement of African Americans. The Radical Republicans turned to an obscure provision in the Constitution that assured each state a Republican government. In another sense, the provision granted the federal government and its supporters license to intervene in state practices and enforce the entitlements of citizenship. According to historian Eric Foner, “A government that denied any of its citizens equality before the law and did not rest fully on the consent of the governed could not be considered republican.”

A host of constitutional amendments established the newfound franchise of African Americans after the Civil War: the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which formally ended slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which accorded citizenship to African Americans and certified the rights of citizens to due process and equality before the law; and the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which declared the rights of citizens to vote regardless of their “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871, and 1875 aimed to add further legal protections and assurances of equal treatment for African Americans. For a time, the core equivalence between Revolutionary-era republicanism and Reconstruction-era radicalism governed the progress of African Americans in the postbellum era. Under these postwar circumstances, African American men who served in the Union Army returned to their home states to reunite with family members (if they could be found) and look for work.

However, the notion that the federal government could control the conduct of individual states, particularly those in the South, fueled controversy. As the postwar tool of Radical Republicans to enfranchise African Americans and protect their rights as citizens, Reconstruction could not progress unencumbered. Constitutional cornerstones began to crack and buckle beneath the pressure imposed by the more resentful and retrogressive elements of American society, jurisprudence, and politics. For example, in December 1874 the Forty-third Congress assembled in the wake of Democratic domination of that year’s elections, weakening the grip of Republicans on both the White House and Congress. (Ten years would elapse before the Republicans again commanded both branches.)
For each electoral advantage that Democrats gained, African Americans despaired that the nation took one step closer to the reinstitution of slavery. Slowly but surely, Democrats were reassuming the governmental helm of southern states. In April 1877 the southern Democrats conceded that Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate for president the previous year, could be declared winner over their own candidate, Samuel Tilden, under two conditions: first, southern and northern capitalists had to work together to ensure the industrial and economic revitalization of Confederate territories, and second, Hayes had to remove federal troops from southern state capitals, where they had been sent to supervise contentious gubernatorial and legislative elections. The so-called Compromise of 1877 began to nullify the Republican principles of Reconstruction that ultimately secured the political franchise of African Americans. As one Kansas Republican stated in February of that year, “I think the policy of the new administration will be to conciliate the white men of the South. Carpetbaggers to the rear, and niggers take care of yourselves.”

Juridical rollbacks accompanied the electoral compromise. Most notably, in the 1873 Slaughter-House cases and the 1876 cases United States v. Cruikshank and United States v. Reese, the Supreme Court weakened federal ability to uphold the liberties and due process of citizens, their right to assembly, and their right to vote, especially when these entitlements, in this court’s view, conflicted with the individual jurisdiction and will of the states. Ironically, the very laws that once shielded the lives and franchise of African Americans in the South now exposed them to terrorist violence. Random white mobs and formalized, paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan plundered the homes of African Americans and castrated, raped, and lynched African American men with impunity. Additional laws designed to save citizens from being victims of fraud and corruption seemed inapplicable to African Americans.

Political disfranchisement amplified the legal vulnerability of African Americans in postbellum times. During this period, as historian Nell Irving Painter rightly notes, “blacks never held political office in proportion to their numbers,” and “any black representation at all was a novelty.” The electoral relegation of African Americans to the lower congressional chamber—the House of Representatives, as opposed to the upper one, the Senate—starkly attested to this disproportion. For African Americans and their supporters, minimal representation was better than no representation at all.

Most whites believed, in contrast, that they would suffer if the political status quo improved or even remained the same for African Americans. As the
Reconstruction period of emancipation and enfranchisement faded in national memory, racist efforts to undo these political attainments grew emboldened and systematic. Eventually, these efforts became victorious in their own right. Discouraging African Americans from running for the House of Representatives and relegating them to less prestigious and powerful posts, such as state legislatures and city councils, were tactics espoused by vocal Democratic constituencies and neglected by the deafening silence of Republican acquiescence.

By the Compromise of 1877, anti-Reconstruction sentiment in the media had reached a crescendo. Punditry in periodicals and books ranged from the Democratic criticism of government to the broader allegation, condoned by many white conservatives and liberals, southerners and northerners alike, that African Americans were fundamentally incapable of representing themselves in the realm of intellect, much less politics. The hallmark egalitarianism of Reconstruction gave way to the purportedly more realistic and practical, but essentially white-supremacist, doctrine of Redemption. Spearheaded by secessionist Democrats and Union Whigs, Redemption sought to ensure Reconstruction’s utter failure.

Historians have shown that racial progress in the nineteenth century culminated with the Reconstruction-era electoral victories of the first African American congressmen and judges. Politicians and, less directly, cultural leaders emerged from African American communities to guide ideological discussions on how electoral politics could combat racial prejudice, injustice, and inequality, and how laws could work on behalf of African American progress toward complete civil rights. Recent scholarship has enabled the discovery of new archives and literary forms emergent during and in the wake of Reconstruction, such as in association with the African American writers Charles W. Chesnutt, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Paul Laurence Dunbar himself. The “unfinished revolution” suggested by Eric Foner in his classic 1989 book *Reconstruction* encourages a historiography that extends the story about the analogous opportunities and challenges of African Americans from the postbellum nineteenth century into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A comprehensive biography of Paul’s life and times enables us to grasp the personal and creative choices he made while maturing into a professional literary writer on the heels of Reconstruction, when he became an emblem of modern African American letters but also a key protagonist in the epic story of race relations in America. Only recently have literary experts begun to pursue this wider lens of analysis, revising the long-held premise that his “dialect
poetry” waged merely a “masked critique of the white racism, invisible to white readers but legible to black audiences.”

Writing a biography of a famous American writer—especially in the case of Paul Laurence Dunbar, born of African descent less than a decade from slavery’s end—invites a host of challenges. Some difficulties include the process of selecting the most relevant details for biographical inclusion; overcoming the practical limits suffered by the African American archive during the era and aftermath of slavery; cutting through the myths of his celebrity to the facts of his life; and capturing the essence of his writings, despite how numerous, dispersed, and sensationalized their publications. Perhaps the greatest challenge was documenting only the portion of the literature, life, and legacy of his wife, Alice, that revolved about his experiences, even though recent scholarly interest, including my own, in her historical significance and literary accomplishments continues to grow, and even though she deserves her own independent biography, one comprehensive enough to tell her life story in all its complexity, wonder, and inspiration. I describe these largely academic issues in the epilogue to this biography, whose conceptual and methodological puzzles rivaled the various puzzles embodied by Dunbar himself.

By the end of this book, new features in Paul’s portrait should emerge even for experts in his life and literature. First, he was more concerned and frustrated with the plight and practices of African American communities than the standard record suggests. Evidence of this sentiment appeared in the editorials he wrote for the Dayton Tattler, the newspaper he edited and circulated for the African American Dayton community in December 1890; in the frequency with which he wrote poems in formal English, not in the dialect suggestive of African American vernacular; in his resistance to using African American protagonists in his early novels; in his and Alice’s private rebukes of fellow African Americans; and in his oscillations between agreement and disagreement with Washington’s doctrine of racial uplift. Second, he was more mentally and emotionally unstable than the standard record suggests. Private letters of correspondence between Paul and Rebekah Baldwin tell us that she, a lesser-known girlfriend on the margins of previous biographies, is crucial when attempting to fathom the unpredictable personality and behavior that he would demonstrate later in his more notorious relationship with Alice. His letters to Alice
reveal that he expressed suicidal thoughts in regret of having committed violence against her. And throughout his life, he expressed deep disappointment with the course and outcome of his career.

Just as the “caged bird,” as Paul deploys the term in “Sympathy,” represents a biographical metaphor of the societal constraints on his life and literature, “For the Man Who Fails,” a poem also appearing in *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, reveals his inner turmoil. In this poem, the speaker addresses “the noble heart and mind / Of the gallant man who fails,” not only the man “who wins the game” and earns “Fame.” An intervention of sorts, the closing of the poem imagines a tale of redemption before it is too late, before history casts a fatal glance upon the life and legacy of “the gallant man”:

We sit at life’s board with our nerves highstrung,
   And we play for the sake of Fame,
And our odes are sung and our banners hung
   For the man who wins the game.
But I have a song of another kind
   Than breathes in these fame-wrought gales,—
An ode to the noble heart and mind
   Of the gallant man who fails!

The man who is strong to fight his fight,
   And whose will no front can daunt,
If the truth be truth and the right be right,
   Is the man that the ages want.
Tho’ he fail and die in grim defeat,
   Yet he has not fled the strife,
And the house of Earth will seem more sweet
   For the perfume of his life.21
Note: Paul Laurence Dunbar’s works are in bold type. Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations. “PLD” and “ARM” refer to Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore (or Alice Dunbar), respectively.

abolitionists, 28, 57, 136
Acanthus Club, 178
Accooe, Will, 202
“Accountability” (poem), 229
activism, PLD and textual, 100, 136
Adams, Lewis, 295
Aesop, “The Ass in the Lion’s Skin,” 233
African Americans: alleged inferiority of, 10, 84, 111, 154, 164–65, 236, 373–74, 401, 451 (see also whites: alleged superiority of); in American literature, 230; Broad- way firsts achieved by, 7, 315, 422; and classical education, 87–88; Dayton com-munity of, 11, 27, 92, 99–101, 169–70; dialect of, 4, 5 (see also dialect poetry and prose); differences among, 376; education of, 57, 62–64, 73, 78, 81, 87, 136, 144–45, 295–96, 327–29, 372–73; elite and middle-class, 177–78, 188–89, 235, 277, 293, 386–87, 399, 410–11, 414, 503n43; family structures of, 49, 60–61, 71; franchise of, 7–9, 480n42, 482n62; and Freemasonry, 383–87; friendships of whites with, 124; gender roles among, 44, 49; intelligentsia’s role among, 51; jobs available to, 44–45; and marriage, 56; music of, 200–201; newspapers by and for, 179; in New York City, 375–76; political participation of, 9–10, 49, 332; reversal of Reconstruction gains by, 9–10; skin color as status marker among, 188–89; in Union Army, 8, 19, 30–34, 36–42, 45–46, 333, 477n98; in Washington, D.C., 177–78, 235, 274, 277, 287, 410–11; white violence against, 332–34, 375–79, 435–36; in Wilmington, North Carolina, 332–33; World’s Colum-bian Exposition’s portrayal of, 163–68.
See also folklore; race; slaves and slavery
“Afro-American” (term), 219, 329
“Air Ship Soon to Fly” (essay), 102
alcohol and alcoholism: Joshua Dunbar’s, 38, 46, 47, 51, 70–71, 103, 272, 291; medical uses of, 272, 290, 352; PLD’s, 5, 6, 103, 170, 203, 272, 278, 280, 283, 285, 290–91, 301, 352, 369, 378–79, 394–95, 397, 401–2, 414–15, 433, 503n43; societal attitudes toward, 272; of soldiers and veterans, 38, 46, 51, 479n16; tuberculosis’s link to, 352; in veterans’ homes, 70–71. See also temperance movement
Alcoholics Mutual Aid Groups, 272
Alexander, Charles, 193
Alexander, Eleanor, 453, 460
“Alice” (poem), 194–95, 493n14
Allen, J. Mord, 230

INDEX
Allen, Richard, 384
AME Church. See African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church
A.M.E. Review (journal), 1
American Anti-Slavery Society, 180
American Historical Association, 451
American Missionary Association, 294, 365
American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church, 205
American Negro Academy, 298–99
American Social Science Association, 372–74
American Sons of Protection, 431
Andrew, John Albion, 33, 41
Andrews, Marie Louise, 119
“Angelina” (poem), 521n22
Angelou, Maya, 469n8; I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 2
Anglo-African Magazine, 101
Anglo Saxons. See whites
A. N. Kellogg Newspaper Company, 116, 117, 302
“Anner Lizer’s Stumblin’ Block” (short story), 503n44
Anthony, Susan B., 186
Anti-Caste (journal), 253
Armstrong, Margaret, 409, 437
Armstrong, Mary Alice, 345
Armstrong, Samuel Chapman, 145, 294–95, 300, 344–45, 409, 442
Armstrong Association, 300, 346
Arnold, Edward F., 363
Arrears of Pension Act (1879), 75
Art Club, 178
Association of American Universities, 403
“At Candle-Lightin’ Time” (poem), 409
Atlanta University, 343, 357
Atlantic Monthly (magazine), 115, 222, 300, 317
“At Loafin’-Holt” (poem), 428–29, 431, 432
Aunt Jemima, 166–67
Baker, Henry F., 265, 500n9
“Ballade” (poem), 468n5
ballads, 455
Ballantine, William Gay, 148
“A Banjo Song” (poem), 140–41, 200, 213, 509n49
Barnett, Ferdinando Lee, 165
Barrett, Elizabeth, 310
Barton, Mary, 380–81
Baum, Ian, 17
Beecher, Henry Ward, 232; A Summer in England, 430
Behman, Louis, 313
Berean Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., 271
Berkeley, George, 120–22
Best, Felton O., 453, 520n14
Bethel Literary and Historical Association, 178, 299, 402
Bibb, Henry, 18, 472n14, 472n22, 474n49
Bible, 406, 444
Black Laws/Codes, 29, 42
Blocher, William L., 130, 443
“Blue” (poem), 518n42
Blumenschein, Ernest, 231
Bohemian (newspaper), 204
bohemianism, 268, 376
Bond, John M., 56
“Booker T. Washington” (poem), 374–75
Booklover’s Magazine, 419
Bookman (magazine), 303, 319, 336
Booth, Edwin, 340
“A Border Ballad” (poem), 455
Boston Conservatory, 200
Boston Daily Standard (newspaper), 196
Boston Transcript (newspaper), 371
Boswell, James, 95
Bowditch, Charles P., 40
Bowditch, Henry L., 360
Bowles, W. O., 78, 84
Boyd, Rubie, 453; “An Appreciation of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” 520n13
Brake, Laurel, 105
Brawley, Benjamin, 453, 520n14
British Romanticism, 3, 65, 67, 133–34, 337
Brooks, Van Wyck, 222
Brown, Hallie Quinn, 157
Brown, Hattie, 167
Brown, Sallie, 355
Brown, William Wells, 17–19, 230, 452, 471n13, 472n22, 474n49
Browning, Robert, 174–75, 310
Bruce, Blanche K., 182
Bruce, John Edward, 353, 355
Bryant, William Cullen, 134, 137, 455; “To a Waterfowl,” 139
Buck, Dudley, 167
Bulwer-Lytton, Edward, The Lady of Lyons; or, Love and Pride, 116
Bumstead, Horace, 343
Burleigh, Harry, 200, 202, 339
Burns, Robert, 227, 430
Burns, William “Bud,” 87, 356, 446–47
Burt, Stephen, 138
Burton, Elizabeth (Matilda Dunbar’s mother), 20, 36, 43, 50, 61
Burton, Elizabeth (PLD’s “aunt”), 270
Burton, Rebecca, 48, 61
Burton, Robert, 270
Burton, Willis, 43
“Bus Jinkins Up Nawth” (short story), 268
Butler, Benjamin, 482n62
Byron, Lord, 65

Cable, George Washington, 113, 214, 220
Cahan, Abraham, 113, 225
cakewalk, 202
Callahan, William P., 111
Callis, Arthur, 458
Cambridge University, 180
cameras, 344
Cameron, Julia Margaret, 350
Cameron, Simon, 31
Campbell, James Edwin, 230
Camp Meigs, 33, 40
Canada, 27–30
Candle-Lightin’ Time (poetry), 409–10, 424, 437, 444, 468n5, 514n24
canes and walking sticks, 161, 272, 438
The Cannibal King (musical), 315, 421, 506n26
“A Career” (poem), 131
Carlyle, Thomas, 430
“The Carnival Is on in Denver” (essay), 364–65
Carreno Club, 178
Carver, George Washington, 329
Catherwood, Mary Hartwell, 151
census, 17, 67–68, 135
Centennial Exhibition (Philadelphia, 1876), 164
Central High School, Dayton, 79–82, 80, 85–87, 85, 90–95, 95, 102, 106–10, 108, 117, 142, 432
Central Lyceum Bureau, 148
The Century (magazine), 115, 122, 148–49, 190, 213, 215, 224, 249, 288, 293, 336, 374
Cerebrospinal meningitis, 290
Chadwick, Samuel, 426
Chamberlain, Joseph, 247
Chambers, Ephraim, 96
chapbooks, 53
Chapman, Mary Berri, 429
Chapman, W. C., 146
Chapman & Hall, 249
“Charity” (poem), 518n42
Chautauqua Literary Scientific Circle, 178
Chicago, Illinois: Interstate Industrial Exposition in, 153; PLD’s experience of, 153, 155–70; socioeconomic conditions of, 155–56; World’s Columbian Exposition in, 152–70, 154
Chicago Daily News (newspaper), 133, 190, 213
Chicago Herald (newspaper), 169
Chicago Inter-Ocean (newspaper), 169
Chicago Interstate Industrial Exposition (1873), 153
Chicago Mail (newspaper), 169
Chicago News (newspaper), 169
Chicago News Record (newspaper), 133, 190, 204, 217
Chicago Record (newspaper), 169, 178, 245, 261
Chicago Tribune (newspaper), 169, 414
“Chris’mus Is A-Comin’” (poem), 509n49
“Chris’ms Is A-Comin’” (poetry), 518n45
Christianity: African Americans’ conversion of Africans to, 180; Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and, 57–58; Washington and, 406
“Christmas Carol” (poem), 103, 132, 133
“The Chronic Kicker” (poem), 141
Cicero, 87, 430
Cincinnati Commercial (newspaper), 69
Civil Rights Acts (1866, 1871, 1875), 8, 482n62
Civil War, 30–31, 387–89. See also Union Army
Clafin, William, 270
Clafin University, 269–70
Clapp, Henry, Jr., 268
Clark, Roger, 353
Clarke, Lewis Garrard, 18, 472n15, 472n22, 474n49
classical education, 81–82, 87–88, 483n15
Clasz, Walter, 133
Cleveland, Grover, 300, 438
Cleveland Gazette (newspaper), 143, 445

Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk (musical), 7, 203, 313–15, 314, 422
Cobb, Rufus Wills, 397
Colborne, John, 29
Cole, Bob, 201, 315, 506n26
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 65, 245
Coleridge-Taylor, Samuel, 6, 245, 246
Colorado, 359–71, 416, 432, 438, 444
Colorado Springs Gazette (newspaper), 368

Colorado Statesman (newspaper), 367
Colored American Magazine, 101, 329, 391–92
Colored Americans/Colored People's Day. See Jubilee Day
Colored Knights of Pythias, 190, 192
“The Colored Soldiers” (poem), 15
“A Columbian Ode” (poem), 133, 140, 213
Columbia Social Club, 178
Columbus, Christopher, 153
Columbus Dispatch (newspaper), 334
Comité des Citoyens, 235
Compromise of 1877, 9, 10
Conover, Charlotte Reeve, 214, 443, 486n9
“Conscience and Remorse” (poem), 227
Constitutional Convention, 24
consumption. See tuberculosis
Conway, Moncure D., 247
Cook, Will Marion, 6, 161–62, 162, 166–68, 201–3, 313–16, 421–22
Cook family, 178
“coon” entertainment, 201, 202, 424
Cooper, Anna Julia, 88
Cooper, Edward Elder, 402
Cooper, W. H., 377–78
Coppin, Frances Jackson, 88
copyright, 412–13
“A Coquette Conquered” (poem), 302, 521n22
Corrothers, James David, 340–41, 392
Cortelyou, George B., 400, 440
Cosmopolitan (magazine), 222, 302
 Cotter, Joseph Seamon, Sr., 230–31, 431
Cotton States and International Exposition (Atlanta, 1895), 124, 296, 367
Cottrill, Charles A., 418
“Couldn’t Speak from Experience” (story), 104
“A Council of State” (short story), 365
couplets, 139–40
Cramer, M. A. Merritt, 429
Crane, Stephen, 113, 223–24, 225, 276, 320, 430; Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, 320
Creoles, 190, 195, 204–5, 245
Critic (magazine), 336
Cromwell, John Wesley, 299
Crouch, Tom, 89, 96
Crummell, Alexander, 6, 180–81, 247, 258, 298–99, 497n16; Africa and America, 181, 431
Culler, Jonathan, 497n29
Cunningham, H. S., 429
Cunningham, Virginia, 64, 453
“Curiosity” (poem), 518n42
Current Literature (magazine), 302, 336
“Curtain” (poem), 213
Curtis, Austin Maurice, 399–400
Curtis, Namoyoka Gertrude, 400
Cyclopædia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (published by Chambers), 96
Czar of Dixie Land (musical), 421
Dabney, Wendell Philips, 160
Dahomeans, 163–65, 168, 422
Daily American (newspaper), 357
Dandridge, Caroline “Danske,” 429
Daniels, William Cooke, 443
D. Appleton & Company, 250, 253, 276
“Dat Chrismus on de Ol’ Plantation” (poem), 256
Dave the Potter, 19
Davidson, Olivia A., 298
Davie, Oliver, 429
Davis, Daniel Webster, 230, 392
Dayton Board of Education, 62, 72, 77, 79, 84, 85, 109
Dayton Democrat (newspaper), 72
Dayton Herald (newspaper), 115, 132, 152
Dayton Normal School, 80–81
Dayton Tattler (newspaper), 11, 91, 97–107, 98, 115, 132, 179, 218, 219, 302
Deaton, Edward, 445
“The Debt” (poem), 425
Defoe, Daniel, Robinson Crusoe, 52–54, 57, 59, 138
Delany, Martin, 384
“The Delinquent” (poem), 239, 468n5
“Dely” (poem), 292, 503n43, 518n42
Democratic (newspaper), 93–94
Democrats, 8–10, 332–33, 387
Denier, Marie E., 437–38
Dennis, Charles, 204
Denver Colored Civic Association, 367
Denver Evening Post (newspaper), 364
Denver Post (newspaper), 362–63, 365, 367
Denver Republican (newspaper), 363, 365
Denver Statesman (newspaper), 363, 438
Derrick, Joseph, 307
Derrick, William B., 307
“The Deserted Plantation” (poem), 229, 239, 347–48, 349, 350, 509n49
Detroit Free Press (newspaper), 190
Dewey, Melville, 352
Diamondback Club, 178
Dickens, Charles, 105
Dillet, Helen Louise, 380–81
“Dinah Kneading Dough” (poem), 409
“Discovered” (poem), 215, 468n5
Dodd, Amzi, 346
Dodd, Frank H., 6, 250, 253, 302–3, 430
domestic labor, 20–23, 34–35, 44, 60–61
Doubleday, Frank Nelson, 397
Doubleday & McClure, 369
Douglas, David, 234, 251
Douglas, Davison M., 85
Douglas, Anna, 186
Douglass, Charles, 177, 179–80
Douglass, Frederick: accomplishments of, 157–58, 230; autobiographies of, 157; death of, 185–87, 190–91; and Haiti, 158, 186; *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 431; at Lincoln’s inauguration, 451; name of, 17; as news correspondent, 243; personal narratives by, 452; photograph of, 159; PLD’s relationship with, 5, 6, 152, 157–58, 160–70, 177–82, 187, 431, 453; “The Race Problem in America,” 167–68; *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, 165–66; and segregated schools, 84; and the Union Army, 33; in Washington, D.C., 177–78; Washington compared to, 367; “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” 433–35; and World’s Columbian Exposition, 157–70, 186
Douglass, Joseph, 160, 163, 166, 167, 283, 434, 454
Douglass, Lewis, 235, 265, 500n9
Douglass’ Monthly (magazine), 101
Dowling, David, 123
Dowling, Robert M., 202
Down de Lover’ s Lane (musical), 421
Downing, Andrew, 429
Downing, Henry Francis, 243–45, 247, 258
Doyle, Arthur Conan, 276, 430
dropsy, 36, 51, 479n11
“A Drowsy Day” (poem), 110, 128, 132, 143, 162, 213
Drury, A. W., 41
Dumas, Alexandre, 230, 430
Dunbar, Elizabeth Florence (sister), 48, 50–51, 448, 478n110
Dunbar, Joshua (father): abandonment of family by, 51, 55, 68; alcoholism of, 38, 46, 47, 51, 70–71, 103, 272, 291; birth of, 17, 453, 471n6; character traits of, 76; death of, 75, 76; education imparted by, 16; marriage and subsequent relationship of, 15–16, 48–50, 55–57, 59–60, 67–68, 89, 91, 97; pension of, 72–75, 83; as plasterer, 17–20; PLD’s relationship with, 16, 48, 60, 75–76, 92, 163; return of, from Union Army, 42–43, 45–47, 51, 68–75; as runaway, 23, 27–30; as subject of biography, 4–5, 251, 451–52; Union Army service of, 33–34, 36–42; violence of, 47, 48, 50, 68, 416

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
Index


Dunton, Lewis M., 270

Durham, John Stephens, “The Labor Unions and the Negro,” 300

Dusten, Charles W., 111–12

Dvořák, Antonín, 200–201; From the New World, 200

Dwyer, Dennis, 49

Dyer, William B., 350

“An Easter Ode” (poem), 65–66, 119, 133

“Easter Poem” (poem), 125

Eckl, Harry, 445

Edel, Leon, 450


Eichberg, Julius, 200

Electoral College, 135

Emancipation Proclamation (1863), 5, 32–33, 35, 347

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 222; Poems, 430


“England as Seen by a Black Man” (essay), 261–62, 334, 414

Enoch, May, 377

Equiano, Olaudah, 452
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>531</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ernest, John, 450</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eskridge, Jeremiah Thomas, 363</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eureka Literary Society, 178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evah Dahkey Is a King” (song), 422</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Evening” (poem), 133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Herald (newspaper), 101</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Item (newspaper), 97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extradition clause, 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faber (newspaper publisher), 93–94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fair Harvard” (Gilman), 404–7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Fiction (magazine), 317</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fanatics (novel), 387–89, 412, 413, 443, 541n24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Farewell Song” (poem), 108–9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fatigue duty, 37–38, 41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fauset, Jessie, 88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, Eugene, 137, 139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifteenth Amendment, 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Cavalry Volunteers, 39, 40–41, 74, 83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifty-fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Colored Infantry, 34, 36–42, 46, 70, 74, 83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 33–34, 38–39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireside Poetry, 3, 134, 136–39, 455</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Confiscation Act (1861), 32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fishing, 356</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisk Jubilee Singers, 127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisk University, 298</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flaubert, Gustave, 195</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood, W. H. Grattan, 404</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folks from Dixie (stories), 294, 302–4, 321, 371, 412, 456, 503n44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foner, Eric, 8, 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbes, Camille, 422</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbes, George Washington, 503n43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Forest Greeting” (poem), 468n5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formal English, 4, 5, 11, 106, 128, 132, 134, 137, 140, 151, 226, 251, 302, 337, 408–9, 424, 442, 456</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“For the Main Who Fails” (poem), 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forthnightly Club, Albany, New York, 352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forthnightly Spectator (newspaper), 353</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune, Timothy Thomas, 328–29, 351, 365–66, 402, 415, 418, 419; The Kind of Education the Afro-American Most Needs, 329</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Wilbur F., 295</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteenth Amendment, 8, 63, 78, 84, 236, 482n62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, Charles Barnard, 37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>franchise of African Americans, 7–9, 480n42, 482n62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederic, Harold, The Damnation of Theron Ware, 322</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedman, Estelle B., 279</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedman’s Savings and Trust Bank, 45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedmen’s Bureau, 44, 49, 55, 400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedmen’s Hospital, Washington, D.C., 399–400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom’s Journal (newspaper), 101, 179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, J. Arthur, 167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freemasonry, 383–87, 513n44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frissell, Hollis Burke, 346</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frissell, Julia, 346</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“From Impulse” (story), 104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fugitive Slave Act (1850), 28, 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuller, Melville W., 441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Gambler’s Wife” (serialized drama), 104–6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gambling, 414–15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garfield, James A., 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garland, Hamlin, 320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrard, James, 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatewood, Willard B., 189</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayle, Addison, Jr., 453</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Theological Seminary, New York, 180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentry, Thomas, 126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibbon, Edward, 95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibbs, Mifflin Wistar, 429</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilder, Richard Watson, 249, 288, 293</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Glass, David, 20–22
Glass, Sarah, 20–22
Glass, Thompson, 20–22
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 248
“Goin’ Back” (poem), 141
“A Golden Chance” (story), 104
gonorrhea, 282, 290
“Good Evenin’” (song), 422
Gooding, James Henry, 37
Grant, Ulysses S., 144, 267
Great Migration, 376
Greeley, Horace, 267
Green, Anna Katherine, 276
Green, John Richard, 95
Grey, John S., “The Bogus Baron De Guyn,” 102
Griggs, Sutton, Imperium in Imperio, 431
Grimké, Archibald, 178
Grimké, Francis James, 299
Grimké family, 178
Guizot, François Pierre Guillaume, 95
Gutman, Herbert H., 17
Hackley, Edwin H., 367, 438, 444
Hast, Gregory, 245
Hart, Bret, 113
Harvard University, 144, 198, 368, 403–7
Hast, Gregory, 245
“The Haunted Oak” (poem), 455, 521n22
Harthorne, Nathaniel, 95, 222, 430; The Scarlet Letter, 195, 320
Hay, John, 245, 398
Hayes, Rutherford B., 9, 144
Haymarket Square, Chicago, 222
Hayson, W. B., 299
Health (magazine), 368
Healy, Thomas, 378
The Heart of Happy Hollow (stories), 441, 443
Henderson, J. H., 307
Henson, Josiah, 57
Herbert, George, 430
Herne, James A., 231; Shore Acres, 224
Herrick, an Imaginative Comedy in Three Acts (play), 421
Hickman, Adam, 445
Higgins, Charles, 445
High School Times (newspaper), 94, 106, 142
Hill, Adams Sherman, 144, 368, 403–4
Hinks, Peter P., 384
“His Bride of the Tomb” (story), 104
“His Failure in Arithmetic” (story), 104
“His Little Lark” (story), 104
History Workshop Journal, 451
Hitchcock, Ethan A., 400
Hitchcock, Ripley, 232
Hobart, Garret A., 220
Hobson, Samuel H., 367
Hogan, Ernest, 201, 313, 315
Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 134, 137, 430, 455
“Home, the Solution of the Negro Problem” (essay), 365
Homer, 87
“The Hoodooing of Mr. Bill Simms” (short story), 268
Hooker, Isabella Beecher, 167
Hopkins, Pauline, 10
Horizon (magazine), 101
Horton, George Moses, 230
*Hot Foot* (musical), 421
*Hottest Coon in Dixie* (musical), 315–16
Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 319
Houston Post (newspaper), 370
Howard University, 288, 328, 399–400
*Howdy, Honey, Howdy* (poetry), 442, 453, 518n43, 521n15
Howells, William Cooper, 222
“How George Johnson Won Out” (short story), 268
Hoyles, Euretta A., 429
Hughes, Jennifer, 388
Hull, Akasha Gloria, 458, 460, 521n25
Hulme, Edward Maslin, 429
“Hunting Song” (poem), 509n49
“Hurrah for Captain Kidd” (song), 422
Hutner, Gordon, 470n19
Hyde, Richard, 313
“A Hymn” (poem), 213, 468n7

Impey, Catherine, 253–55, 443
Impey, Ellen, 254–55
Impey family, 253, 424
*In Dahomey* (musical), 7, 422, 423, 506n26
“The Independence of Silas Bollender” (short story), 408
*Independent* (newspaper), 150, 190, 261, 276, 299, 300, 302, 327, 330
Indianapolis Freeman (newspaper), 402
Indianapolis Journal (newspaper), 122, 125, 126, 128, 133, 142, 213, 217, 224, 322
Indianapolis World (newspaper), 192–93, 193, 195, 207–8, 219
Ingersoll, Robert Green, 265–67
“The Ingrate” (short story), 19
*In Old Plantation Days* (stories), 436, 443
“In Summer Time” (poem), 133
“In the Tents of Akbar” (poem), 468n5
“Ione” (poem), 203–4, 249
Irving, Washington, 430
“Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?” (essay), 373–74
Jackson, Virginia, 455, 497n29
Jacobs, Harriet, 452
James, Henry, 223, 225, 320
James, William, 329
James Pott and Company, 418–19
“James Whitcomb Riley” (poem), 137–38, 141
Jarrold and Sons, 412
Jaxon, Helen, 245
J. B. Lippincott Company, 276
Jefferson, Thomas, 426, 451
Jenkins, Will, 518n43
*Jes Lak White Fo’ks* (musical), 421, 506n26
Jewett, John P., 57
Jewish American writers, 225
Jim Crow laws, 5, 61, 87, 92, 165, 235, 236, 395
Joggin’ Erlong (poetry), 442–43, 453, 518n43
“John Boyle O’Reilly” (poem), 140
John Lane (publisher), 250, 253
Johnson, Billy, 201
Johnson, Charles, 142
Johnson, D. W., 38
Johnson, James (father of James Weldon Johnson), 380
Johnson, James William, 248
Johnson, Lola, 454
Johnson, Robert Underwood, 374–75
Johnson, Rosamond “Rosy,” 202, 380–82; “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (with James Weldon Johnson), 381
Johnson, R. U., 149
Johnston, Elizabeth Bryant, 429
Jones, Gavin, 113
Jones, Jacqueline, 22, 60–61
Jones, Samuel M., 429
Jones, Sissieretta, 166–67
Journal (newspaper), 101
Journal of the Lodge (newspaper), 190, 192
Jubilee Day, World’s Columbian Exposition, 166–68, 180, 186
Jubilee for Queen Victoria. See England: queen’s diamond jubilee in
Judge (newspaper), 102
Jump Back (Negro Love Song) (musical), 316
Kalamazoo Gazette (newspaper), 379
Kansas City Star (newspaper), 388, 433
Kantrowitz, Stephen, 384
Kate Field’s Washington (magazine), 190
Kauffman, Reginald W., 443–44
Keating, Hightower Theodore, 419
Keats, John, 65, 430
Keen, Edwin H., 239, 443
“Keep A-Pluggin’ Away” (poem), 77, 141
“Keep a Song Up on De Way In” (poem), 468n5
Keith, Prowse, and Company, 244
Kellogg, Ansel Nash, 117
Kellogg, Warren F., 329
Kelly, Patrick J., 74
Kemble, Edward Windsor, 303
Kentucky, 24, 135, 136
Kentucky Negro Education Association, 136
King, William, 426
Kipling, Rudyard, 430
“Kissing as Medicine” (story), 104
Kitching, William, 242
Kline, Walter L., 445
Knopf, Sigard Adolphus, 360
Koch, Robert, 351
Kuhns, Ezra M., 112, 443, 445
Ku Klux Klan, 9, 328
Ku Klux Klan Act (1871), 482n62
labor, 300
Ladies’ Home Journal (magazine), 256, 276, 336
“Lager Beer” (poem), 103–4, 140
Lakeside Summer Assembly and Camp Meeting, 208
Langston, John Mercer, 384
“The Language We Speak” (story), 104
Laurie, H. W., 369
Lears, Jackson, 155, 480n42
Leavenworth Herald (newspaper), 329
Legacy: A Journal of American Woman Writers, 459
Leggett, Benjamin Franklin, 429
The Letter (magazine), 214
Lewis, Julia, 501n30
Lewis, Will, 278
Liberia, 58, 180
Library Journal, 267
library of PLD, 6; contents of, 428–32; decorative items in, 432–33; formation of, 144, 148; gifts in, 429–31, 439
“Life” (poem), 213
“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Johnson and Johnson), 381
Light (magazine), 102
Li’l’ Gal (poetry), 441–42
Lincoln, Abraham, 31, 32, 35, 36, 222, 445, 451
Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine, 276, 302, 319, 321, 408, 411–12
literary criticism, 231, 250. See also Dunbar, Paul Laurence: critical responses to work of
Little Africa, Dayton, 62–63
“Little Billy” (short story), 116
“Little Brown Baby” (poem), 509n49, 521n22
Lloyd, William J., 429
Loafing-Holt (PLD’s study), 6, 428–33, 439
Lockwood, Belva Ann, 72–74, 73, 83
Loeb, William, Jr., 400
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 64, 121, 134, 136–37, 139, 455; “A Psalm of Life,” 139
Lorimer, George Horace, 443
“The Lost Dream” (poem), 468n5
Lotus Club, 178
L’Ouverture, Toussaint, 158
Love, John Lee, 299
The Love of Landry (novel), 369–70, 443
“Lover’s Lane” (poem), 468n5
“Love’s Apotheosis” (poem), 468n5
“The Love’s Castle” (poem), 468n5
Lowell, James Russell, 134, 136–37, 430, 455; “A Psalm of Life,” 139
Lyrics of Love and Laughter (poetry), 4, 424–25, 437, 443, 454–55, 468n5, 498n30
Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow (poetry), 428, 442, 443, 455, 468n5, 498n30, 514n24
Lyrics of the Hearthside (poetry), 1, 12, 336–37, 348, 409, 424, 443, 454, 468n5, 469n17, 498n30, 503n43
Mabie, Hamilton Wright, In a Forest of Arden, 430
MacArthur, James, 319
Macaulay, Thomas, 53
Maclaren, Ian (pseudonym of John Watson), 239
Manhattan Club, 178
Manning, Alexander, 192
Marcus Whitmark and Sons, 313
Marrant, John, 45–46, 75
Martin, Jay, A Singer in the Dawn, 521n21
Mary E. Garst Estate, 113
Masons. See Freemasonry
Matthews, Courtland, 452
Matthews, James Newton, 6, 119, 122–28, 132, 137, 142, 143–44, 147–50, 155, 169, 184, 185, 231, 452, 455; Temple Vale and Other Poems, 429
Matthews, Victoria Earle, 6, 237–38, 265, 291, 329, 380, 430; Aunt Lindy, 237, 431
McCaughey, W. F., 145
McClellan, George Marion, 340–41, 431; Poems, 341
McGirt, James Ephraim, 429
McKee, William, 49
McKinlay, Whitefield, 402
McKinley, William, 6, 154, 220, 221, 230, 267, 398–99, 520n14
McLean, William E., 83
McVickar, William Neilson, 397
Mead, Charles L., 345–46
Mead, Edward, 346
Mead, Elinor, 222
Mead, Frank, 346
“The Meadow Lark” (poem), 140, 213
“Melancholia” (poem), 106–7, 109, 183
“Memorial Day” (poem), 133
“The Memory of Martha” (poem), 468n5
Meningococcal disease, 290
Merrill, Winifred Edgerton, 352
“Merry Autumn” (poem), 133, 468n5
Metcalf, Eugene W., Jr., 453, 460; Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Bibliography, 449
Meter, 106, 132, 138–41, 150, 488n18
Methodists, 28, 46
Metropolitan AME Church, Washington, D.C., 186–87
Meyerbeer, Giacomo, 167
Miami Canal, 28
Miami County Temperance Society, 46
Miami Loan and Building Association, 426
Midwest: Chicago’s role in, 156; newspapers thriving in, 93; PLD’s ties to, 115, 117, 133, 208, 263; poetry and literature of, 111, 120–23, 134, 137
Militia Act (1862), 32
Miller, A. P., 299
Miner, Leigh Richmond, 442, 518n43
“The Minority Committee” (short story), 408
minstrelsy, 201, 225, 381, 383
Mirror of Liberty (magazine), 101
Mitchell, Abbie, 315
Mitchell, Charles, 399
modernity, 156
Monday Night Literary Society, 178
“The Monks Walk” (poem), 468n5
Monthly Review (magazine), 188, 190, 193, 207
Monthly Review Publishing House, 195
Moon (magazine), 419
Moore, Joseph, 205
Moore, Leila, 212
Moore, Patricia, 264, 273, 283, 285, 308–9, 311, 312, 420, 516n33
Moore, Tom, “Believe me, if all these endearing young charms,” 404
Moore, W. H. A., 229–30
Moran, Edward P., “Evah Dahkey Is a King” (with PLD), 422
Morgan, Carrie Blake, 429
Morris, Edmund, 440
Morse, Alice, 348, 409
“The Mortification of the Flesh” (short story), 408
Moton, Robert Russa, 345
Mott, Frank Luther, 93, 101
Motto, Marie, 245
“Mt. Pisgah’s Christmas ‘Possum’” (short story), 456
The Murdered Lover” (poem), 468n5
Murger, Henri, Scènes de la Vie de Bohème, 268
Murphy, Electra, 155
Murphy, Ethel, 155
Murphy, Matilda (mother). See Dunbar, Matilda
Murphy, Paul, 155
Murphy, Robert (half-brother), 16, 45, 48, 52, 54, 57, 61, 63–64, 71, 75, 111, 138, 155–57, 199, 212, 263, 478n110
Murphy, William (half-brother), 16, 36, 39–40, 48, 52, 54, 57, 61, 63–64, 71, 75, 138, 155–56, 212, 263
Murphy, Wilson, 31–32, 35–36, 39–40, 43, 48–49, 475n56
Murray, Margaret James, 298, 300–301
music, 200–202, 245, 248, 454
M. Whitmark and Sons, 203
“My Lady of Castle Grand” (poem), 468n5
“My Sort o’ Man” (poem), 141, 151, 336
“My Thought–And Hers?” (poem), 256

The Nation (magazine), 303, 336
National Afro-American Council, 353
National Afro-American League, 329
National Association of Colored Women, 237, 298
National Cash Register Company, 111, 435
National Conservatory, New York, 200
National Council of Women, 186
National Era (newspaper), 57
National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, Dayton, 68–71, 70, 75, 76, 152, 481n57, 482n62
National Institute of Arts and Letters, 372
National Reformer (newspaper), 101
naturalism, 321, 411
“The Negro as an Individual” (essay), 414
“The Negroes of the Tenderloin” (essay), 334–35
Negro Farmer’s Conference, 338, 342
“The Negro in Literature” (essay), 392, 395

“Negro Life in Washington” (essay), 410, 444
Negro Problem, 126
The Negro Problem (edited by Washington), 419
“Negro Society in Washington” (essay), 410–11, 414
Nelson, Robert J., 458
New England Magazine, 329, 375
New National Era (newspaper), 84
New Negroes, 3, 219, 293, 413, 458
newspapers, 93, 99, 101, 179. See also syndication
New York Age (newspaper), 215, 229, 300, 329, 422
New York City: African Americans in, 375–76; PLD’s ties to, 263–64; race riots in, 375–79; Tenderloin district, 202, 268, 334–35, 356–57, 376, 411, 500n19
New York Commercial (newspaper), 339–41
New York Daily Tribune (newspaper), 378
New York Herald (newspaper), 102, 267
New York Journal (newspaper), 268–69, 302, 371
New York Times (newspaper), 217, 303, 322, 336, 376, 377, 388, 433
New York Tribune (newspaper), 267, 352, 370
Nicholson, Peter, 18
Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Study Group, 459
Norris, Frank, 224, 320–21, 430
North Star (newspaper), 179
Northwest Ordinance (1787), 24
“Not They Who Soar” (poem), 455
Noyes Academy, New Hampshire, 180
Nurhussein, Nadia, 115

Oak and Ivy (poetry), 5, 77, 131–47, 149, 157, 160, 181, 196, 200, 213, 251, 321, 336, 348, 443, 455, 457, 468n5
Obama, Barack, 7
Oberlin College, 148
“October” (poem), 133
“Ode for Memorial Day” (poem), 125
“Ode to Ethiopia” (poem), 133, 135–36, 139–40, 146, 160, 213
“Ode to the Colored American” (poem), 168–69, 201
“Of Negro Journals” (essay), 178–79
Ogden, Robert, 346, 397
“Oh, No” (poem), 102–3
Ohio, 23–25, 27–29, 42
Ohio Historical Society, 452, 458, 517n16
“Ohio Pastorals” (stories), 408–9
Ohio River, 26–27
Ohio State Journal (newspaper), 222
“The Old Apple Tree” (poem), 141
“The Old Country Paper” (poem), 151
“The Old Fashioned Way” (poem), 217
“The Old High School and the New” (poem), 117
“The Old Homestead” (poem), 133
Old Negro, 5
Old Sukey (horse), 361
“The Ol’ Tunes” (poem), 128, 132, 141, 143, 147, 151, 160, 213, 217
Oneida Institute, 180
“One Life” (poem), 173, 184
“On Emancipation Day” (song), 422
“On the Death of W. C.” (poem), 133
“On the Dedication of Dorothy Hall (Tuskegee, Ala., April 22, 1901)” (poem), 397–98
“On the River” (poem), 102, 132
“The Ordeal of Mt. Hope” (short story), 294, 299–300, 303
Oriental America Co., 313
Osofsky, Gilbert, 332–34
“Our Martyred Soldiers” (poem), 102
“Our New Madness” (essay), 327–29, 338, 342, 344, 373–75
Outlook (magazine), 302, 303, 375
Page, Thomas Nelson, 113, 218, 341, 436
Page, Walter Hines, 124, 319
Painter, Nell Irving, 9
Pan Africanism, 180
Panic of 1873, 45
Parker, Alton Brooks, 440
Parker, Benjamin S., 429
Parker, Ben S., 151
Parrish, John W., 287, 502n33
“Parted” (poem), 518n42
“The Party” (poem), 227–28, 247, 456
The Past Before Us (American Historical Association), 451
patrons, 123–24. See also Dunbar, Paul Laurence: patrons of
Patton, Robert, 82
Paul Laurence Dunbar Papers, Ohio Historical Society, 452, 458
Penn, Irvine Garland, 165
Pennington, E. J., 102
pensions, 51, 69, 71–75, 83
People’s Advocate (newspaper), 328
Peregrino, Francis Zaccheus Santiago, 353, 355
Perry, Susan, 317
Pfrimmer, William W., 122, 137, 151;
Driftwood, 429
Philadelphia Press (newspaper), 338, 342
Philadelphia Times (newspaper), 373
Phillips, Wharton D., 367
Philomathean Society of Central High School, 94, 95
photography, 344–45, 350
“Phyllis” (poem), 191
Pitts, Helen, 186, 235
P. J. Plant (publisher), 441
“The Plantation Child’s Lullaby” (poem), 518n42
plastering, 18
Plato, Desiree, 167
Plessy, Homer, 235–36
Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), 235–36
Plutarchus, Lucius Mestrius, 95
pneumonia, 352–53, 355, 426. See also tuberculosis
Poe, Edgar Allan, “Annabel Lee,” 116
Poems of Cabin and Field (poetry), 321, 348, 349, 350, 359, 409, 424, 437, 444
**Poems of Places** (edited by Longfellow), 121

“The Poet” (poem), 4

“The Poet and His Song” (poem), 456

politics: African American participation in, 9–10, 49, 332; white control of, 9–10.

See also franchise of African Americans

Pond, Edith, 6, 243–44, 247, 249, 253, 257–59

Pond, “Major” James Burton, 6, 232–35, 244, 263, 430

Populists, 332–33

Porter, Rebecca, 20, 36, 43

*Possum Am de Best Meat After All* (musical), 421

Potter, Henry C., 321

“A Practical Suggestion” (story), 104

pregnancy and childbirth, 22, 36

“Preparation” (poem), 468n5

Preston, Charles A., 158

printing, 96

Providence Telegram (newspaper), 338

Puccini, Giacomo, *La Bohème*, 268

Puck (magazine), 317

Pushkin, Aleksander, 230

Quackenbos, John D., *Illustrated History of Ancient Literature, Oriental and Classical*, 144

Quakers, 27, 255, 298

Quincy, Josiah, 404

quinine, 316


“The Race Question Discussed” (essay), 333–34


racial uplift, 3, 11, 166, 178, 219, 296, 298, 334, 343, 346, 347, 374, 413, 429

Radical Republicans, 7–8

Rae, John, 518n43

rape, 278–79

Ray, Joseph, and Eli T. Tappan, *Treatise on Geometry and Trigonometry*, 432

Read, James, 33

Readville, Massachusetts, 33–34, 39

realism, 59, 223, 225, 250, 317, 320–21, 348, 370, 409, 456. See also naturalism

Reconstruction: African American political participation during, 49; African Americans in Washington, D.C., during, 177; backlash against and decline of, 9–10, 59, 62, 70, 101, 332–33, 347, 480n42; duration of, 7, 469n13; education during, 61, 78, 294; federal forces deployed during, 9, 469n13; franchise of African Americans during, 7–9, 89; goals of, 7; PLD’s life during and after, 3, 6; scholarship on, 470n19; Washington’s views on, 499n65

Redemption, 10, 61, 70, 333, 480n42

Reform Leaflets (newspaper), 95

religion, 67, 436. See also Christianity

Religious Telescope (newspaper), 89, 94

Renker, Elizabeth, 134

Republican National Committee, 440

Republicans, 185–86, 220, 221, 224, 332.

See also Radical Republicans

“Retrospect” (poem), 150
“Returned” (song), 422
Revels, Hiram, 384
Reynolds, Paul Revere, 303, 350, 408, 411–13
Richmond, Indiana, 145
Richmond Independent (newspaper), 145
Richmond Star (newspaper), 95
Ricks, William, 378
Ridpath, John Clark, 120, 122
Riley, James Whitcomb, 6, 97, 113, 114, 120, 122, 127–29, 133, 137–39, 143, 147, 392, 430, 438, 445; Love Lyrics, 350
rings, 280–82, 284, 287–88
Ripley, Ezra, 404
“The Rivals” (poem), 146–47, 151
Rivers, Joseph D. D., 367
Robinson, Fay Jackson, 458
Rocky Mountain News (newspaper), 363, 365
Rollin, Horace Judson, 429
Romanticism. See British Romanticism
Ronda, Margaret, 455
Roosevelt, Edith, 401
Roosevelt, Theodore, 6, 353, 354, 355, 399–401, 429, 438–41, 455, 509n10, 520n12; Presidential Addresses and State Papers of Theodore Roosevelt, 439
Rothman, Sheila M., 361, 444
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, 430
Ruffin, Josephine St. Pierre, 289
Rydell, Robert W., 154
“Salutatory” (essay), 91
Sancho, Ignatius, 451
Santayana, George, 329
Sargent, Epes, 144
Saturday Evening Post (magazine), 364, 410, 444
Savage Club, London, 243
Scarborough, William Sanders, 88, 157, 243
Schönlein, J. L., 351
Schoolroom Poetry. See Fireside Poetry
Scott, Emmett Jay, 327–29, 390, 394–97, 402
Scott, Walter, 95, 431
Scribner (magazine), 93
Second Confiscation Act (1862), 32
Second Massachusetts Cavalry, 34
“The Seeding” (poem), 213
“The Seedling” (poem), 468n5
segregation: in Canada, 29; in education, 57, 62–63, 72, 78, 84–85, 92; PLD’s early experiences of, 5, 6; on public transportation, 235–36; in Union Army, 32, 42; in veterans’ homes, 70; in world’s expositions, 165
Selkirk, Alexander, 52
Seneca Falls Convention, 158
Senegambian Carnival (variety show), 315
serialized literature, 104–5, 117, 275–76
Shakespeare, William, 430; Julius Caesar, 116; King Richard III, 319; The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, 197
Shannon, Maud, 307–8, 509n4
Shaw, Anna Howard, 186
Shearer, J. L., 148, 149
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 65
Shivell, Paul, 231
“Signs of the Times” (poem), 302, 509n49
Sines, Ed, 129
Slaughter-House cases (1873), 9
slave-catching, 26
slaves and slavery: as artisans, 17–20, 472n15; census counts of, 17, 135; emancipation of, 35, 43–44; female, 22–23, 32, 36; Kentucky statutes on, 135; music of, 200, 245; naming of, 17; PLD’s experience of, 135–36; as property or “types,” 17, 135; runaway, 19–20, 23–30, 24, 25; scholarship on, 450–51, 453; as subject in PLD’s poetry, 135, 140–41
“Sling Along” (poem), 442
Smith, Ella, 310
Smith, Fannie N., 298
Smith, Wilford Horace, 419
Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, 164
smoking, 396–97, 433
Social History (journal), 451
“Solution of Negro Problem Seen from Two Sides” (essay), 365
“Some London Impressions” (essay), 261
“A Song” (poem), 194, 493n14
“Song” (To Miss Alice Ruth Moore) [poem], 194–95, 493n14
“Song of Summer” (poem), 409, 468n5
Southern Workman (journal), 300, 345, 347, 409, 442
“Sparrow” (poem), 213
Sparta Club, 178
Spencer, Herbert, 431
Spofford, Ainsworth Rand, 267
The Sport of the Gods (novel), 321, 408, 411–14
Spratlin, Paul Edward, 367
Stanley, Henry Morton, 258
Stanton, Edwin, 41–42
Stanton, Frank L., 220
states, racial legislation of, 8–9
State v. Farr (Kentucky, 1841), 24
Steele, Robert W., 62, 84
Stephans, Jacob, 49
stereotypes. See racial stereotypes
Stewart, Frank, 503n43
Stivers, Charles B., 86, 443
Stoddard, Charles Warren, 268
Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 167, 232, 413; Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 57–59, 138
Straight University, 205
The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories (stories), 371, 436, 443
Strothotte, Maurice Arnold, 167
Stuart, Joseph H., 367
Stuart, Ruth McEnery, 218, 341, 430
“A Summer Pastoral” (poem), 133, 141, 217
“Sunset” (poem), 133, 213, 455
“Sympathy” (poem), vii, 1–2, 12, 456, 468n5, 468n6, 469n8
syndication, 116–17
Syphax family, 178
Talent, Tenth, 419
Taylor, William, 52
temperance movement, 46, 272
“The Tenderfoot” (short story), 116
Tenderloin district, New York, 202, 268, 334–35, 356–57, 376, 411, 500n19
Tenderloin stories, 268–69
Tenney, Edward, 461
Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 430; Idylls of the King, 350; “Lady Clara Vere de Vere,” 116
Terrell, Mary Church, 88, 157, 386
Terrell, Robert Heberton, 386
Terrell family, 178
“A Thanksgiving Poem” (poem), 133
Thatcher, Charles A., 145–50
theater, 200–202
“Theology” (poem), 214
Third Civic Division, 398
Thirteenth Amendment, 8, 236
Thomas, Charles S., 366
Thompson, Aaron Belford, 431
Thompson, James Maurice, 120
Thoreau, Henry, 222
Thorpe, Robert, 377–78
Tid-Bits (magazine), 317
Tilden, Samuel, 9
“Time to Tinker ‘Roun’!” (poem), 509n49
Timewell, William and Elizabeth, 23, 36
“To a Violet Found on All Saint’s Day” (poem), 468n5
Tobey, Henry Archibald, 6, 196, 197, 198, 199, 261, 266, 273, 316, 321, 363, 396, 418, 445
“To Dr. James Newton Matthews” (poem), 137, 455
Toledo Bee (newspaper), 149
Toledo Blade (newspaper), 145
Toledo Journal (newspaper), 333
Tomfoolery (periodical), 94
“To Miss Mary Britton” (poem), 136–37
Topeka Plaindealer (newspaper), 351, 359–60, 363, 368
“To Pfrimmer” (poem), 137
“To the Miami” (poem), 133
Tourgée, Albion W., 236
Troy, Ohio, 27–28, 34, 42–43
Troy Sons of Temperance, 46
Troy Total Abstemious Temperance Society, 46

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
Truesdale, Mrs. (teacher), 110
Tuberculosis, 351–53, 355, 359–61, 380, 444
Turner, Henry McNeal, 167
“The Tuskegee Meeting” (essay), 338
“Tuskegee Song” (song), 402–7
Tuskegee Student (newspaper), 407
Tuskegee Women’s Club, 298
Twain, Mark, 113, 223, 232, 268; *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 303; *The Gilded Age* (with Charles Dudley Warner), 372; *Roughing It*, 361
“Twixt Smile and Tear” (poem), 455
“Two Little Boots” (poem), 468n5

SS Umbria, 239–40, 242
*Uncle Eph’s Christmas* (musical), 421, 506n26
Underground Railroad, 25, 27–28, 33
Union Army: African Americans’ return to civilian life, 45–46, 68–71; African Americans’ service in, 8, 19, 30–34, 36–42, 333, 477n98; alcoholism in, 38, 46, 51, 479n11; officers in, 42; organization of, 34; payments by, 38, 42, 74, 477n98; race relations in, 42
Union Whigs, 10
United Brethren Church, 48, 49, 88–89, 91, 94–96
United Brethren Printing Establishment, 94
United States African News Company, 243
*United States v. Cruikshank* (1876), 9
*United States v. Reese* (1876), 9
University of Delaware, 458, 459
U.S. Congress, 68, 135
U.S. Constitution, 8, 23
U.S. Department of the Interior, 400
U.S. National Commission, 164

U.S. Sanitary Commission, Bureau of Information and Employment, 45
U.S. Supreme Court, 72–74
Vaudeville, 201
Venable, Jack and Margaret, 22, 31
Verdi, Giuseppe, 167
Victoria, Queen, 247–48
Virgil, 86, 87
Virgil, *Aeneid*, 430
“The Visiting of Mother Danbury” (short story), 408
Vocational education. See industrial education
*Voice of the Negro* (magazine), 101

Wadsworth Bennett, 64
Walcott, Joe, 378
Walker, George, 201–2, 313, 315, 421–22, 423
Walker, John Brisben, 222
Walking sticks. See canes and walking sticks
Wallace, Walter W., 101
Walters, Alexander, 167
Walters, Spencer, 378
War Department, 41
Ware, Eugene G. (pseudonym: Ironquill), 151
Warfield, William A., 400
Warner, Charles Dudley, 372; “The Education of the Negro,” 372–74; *The Gilded Age* (with Mark Twain), 372
“The Warrior’s Prayer” (poem), 521n22
Warwick, Beatrice, 454
Washington, Allen, 345


*Washington, D.C. Times* (newspaper), 336

*Washington Post* (newspaper), 365, 371

Watermelon, 166–67

Wayland Seminary, 295, 406

Weichselbaum, Anton, 290

“Welcome Address” (poem), 110–11, 120–21, 132

Wells, Ida B., 157, 165, 166, 169, 237, 243, 253, 329, 453

“Weltenschmertz” (poem), 468n5

West End Club, Toledo, 146–47

Western Association of Writers, 110–11, 119–22, 132, 150–51, 208, 219

*West Side News* (newspaper), 96–97, 102, 115

“The West Side News” (poem), 102

Wetmore, J. Douglass, 380

“We Wear the Mask” (poem), 268–69, 455, 456

Wharton, Edith, 225, 320, 430

Wheatley, Phillis, 191, 230, 451

“When de Co’n Pone’s Hot” (poem), 228, 456

“When Malindy Sings” (poem), 228–29, 249, 302, 437, 456

*When Malindy Sings* (poetry), 436–37, 441

“When the Old Man Smokes” (poem), 256

Whale, Robert K., 22–23, 35, 473n34

“The White Counterpane” (short story), 408

White Rose Mission, 238, 292

whites: alleged superiority of, 31, 62, 84, 146, 163–64, 333–34, 414, 480n42 (see also African Americans: alleged inferiority of); friendships of African Americans with, 124; post-Reconstruction attitudes and actions of, 9–10, 332–34; slavery’s harmful effects on, 343–44; violence against African Americans, 332–34, 375–79, 435–36

Whitfield, James M., 230

Whitlock, Brand, 232, 445–46

Whitman, Albery Allison, 230, 431; *Twasinta’s Seminoles; or, Rape of Florida*, 340–41

Whitman, Walt, 265, 268, 382–83

“Whittier” (poem), 133–34

Whittier, John Greenleaf, 122, 133–34, 136–37, 455

*Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?* (musical), 316

Wiggins, Lida Keck, 453, 459; *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, 449

Wilberforce University, 182

Wilde, Oscar, 276

Wilkinson, Maud, 505n4

Williams, Daniel, 282, 310, 399–400

Williams, Egbert “Bert,” 201–2, 313, 315, 421–22, 423

Williams, Fannie Barrier, 160

Williams, Samuel Laing, 160, 165

Wilmington, North Carolina, riots, 332–34, 435–36

*Wilmington Advocate* (newspaper), 457–58

Wilson, Samuel C., 77–79

Winks, Robin W., 28

Winterer, Caroline, 87

Witmark, Isidore, 313

Woman’s Era (newspaper), 289

Woman’s Era Club, 289

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Loyal Union</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood, Charles</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woods, Charles Winter</td>
<td>339, 340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodward, Sidney</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, Henry</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, William</td>
<td>64–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World’s Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893)</td>
<td>5, 152–70, 154, 173, 180, 186, 200, 201, 403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World’s Columbian Exposition Illustrated</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World’s Industrial and Cotton Exposition</td>
<td>(New Orleans, 1884–1885), 164–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wormley family</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, John Livingston, “Three Negro Poets,”</td>
<td>391–92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Milton</td>
<td>49, 88–91, 94–95, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Orville</td>
<td>5, 85–86, 85, 88–90, 90, 91–92, 94–97, 102, 107–8, 113, 115, 129, 453, 519n56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Patricia</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Susan</td>
<td>88–89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Wilbur</td>
<td>5, 88–90, 90, 91–92, 95–96, 102, 113, 129, 453, 519n56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright &amp; Wright</td>
<td>91–92, 97, 113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophon</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yellow Jack’s Game of Craps” (short story)</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, James (ARM’s brother-in-law)</td>
<td>212, 285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, James Carleton (also known as Arcadius Yonge)</td>
<td>429–30; Fantasma, 429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, John Russell</td>
<td>266–67, 330–32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, Leila</td>
<td>272, 285, 308–9, 311, 312, 338, 425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, Pauline A.</td>
<td>452, 458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zola, Émile</td>
<td>321, 430</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>