Singular Vision.
Preservationists honor the legacy of Mary Cardwell Dawson.

TWO DECADES AGO, Jonnet Solomon was driving through the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, when she saw a plaque in front of a condemned Victorian house on Apple Street. The plaque identified the house as the one-time home of Mary Cardwell Dawson and former headquarters of the National Negro Opera Company. “I love history,” says Solomon. “I’d studied African-American history, but I’d never heard of Dawson or the NNOC.” She’s not alone. The story of the longest-running, all-Black opera company in the U.S., and its founder, Mary Cardwell Dawson—the first Black woman to head an American opera company—has long lain hidden between the lines of opera history. Now Dawson and the NNOC are returning to the limelight.

In September 2020, the house at 7101 Apple Street was added to the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places list, thereby recognizing the importance of Dawson’s legacy and rescuing from the periphery the story of the NNOC. “The house itself was still in jeopardy,” Solomon acknowledges. “There had been all-Black opera companies in existence, but most of them were run by white men and a few by Black men,” says Dr. Karen Bryan, professor of musicology at University of South Florida and author of an upcoming book on the NNOC and Dawson. “But the NNOC was the first to be founded and run by a Black woman.” Under Dawson’s leadership, the NNOC included affiliated chapters in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and New York, and in 1955, it became the first independent opera company invited to perform at the Metropolitan Opera, where it presented Clarence Cameron White’s Osorungo.

The casts of the NNOC’s productions consisted of local talent as well as singers such as Julia Rhea (Aida in the NNOC’s first performance), who were struggling to build careers in the U.S. when most opera companies would not hire Black performers. The NNOC also welcomed Black singers who had had success singing principal roles in Europe but found the doors of American opera houses closed to them, including soprano Lillian Evanti. “Evanti worked as a cultural ambassador during World War II, performing Negro spirituals on tour in Latin America,” says Elizabeth Campbell, a Ph.D. candidate in musicology at UC Davis, whose research focuses on Lillian Evanti and the NNOC. “She had a successful career performing in Europe before the war, but her only fully staged performances stateside were four Violettas with the NNOC in 1943.”

During the two-decade history of the company, Bryan estimates that Dawson provided performance opportunities for more than 1,800 singers. Some, such as Robert McFerrin and Napoleon Reed, went on to careers in opera and on Broadway, while others were enriched and uplifted by their experiences performing with the NNOC.

Shortly after Solomon first saw the house, she and friend Miriam White, who died in 2009, purchased the home. “We set out to learn everything we could about it and speak to every living person who had been connected to the house,” says Solomon. “We wanted to gather and record as much information as possible, so that others could learn about Dawson and the NNOC.”

In 2013, the NNOC was granted a call number in the Library of Congress, now containing more than 11,900 records, but the house itself was still in jeopardy. With the help and advocacy of the Young Preservators...
Association of Pittsburgh, Solomon applied to get the house named one of the National Trust’s Eleven Most Endangered Places, after several unsuccessful attempts. “What Dawson created with the NNOC is just as significant as Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball—she broke the color barrier on the opera stage,” says YPA executive director Matthew Craig. “Preserving the house is preserving that legacy and creating the place for more of these stories to come forward.”

Although the NNOC was headquartered at 7101 Apple Street for only one year, the house stands as a symbol of a lost history waiting to be discovered. “The house on Apple Street really represents what Dawson was trying to do with the NNOC, building community through music,” says Dr. Bryan. “Its preservation is a tribute to the NNOC’s historical importance.”

Now that 7101 Apple Street has been added to the Eleven Most Endangered Places List, the Young Preservationists Association will compile a preservation plan to understand the full costs for renovating the house, develop a process for restoration, then come up with a vision for reusing the space and returning it to the Homewood community.

“From the beginning, we wanted to restore the house to its former role in the community as a place for artists to gather and to provide training in classical music for aspiring artists,” says Solomon. “Another goal is to create a self-guided museum, so that people can walk through and experience the history of the house.”

“We need to know what this house can tell us about Black life and history that is part of the American tapestry,” says Dr. Naomi André, author of Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement. “What slice of life, what rich stories that have been lost does this house have to tell us?”

Steven Jude Tietjen, a writer and translator in New York City, has created supertitles for more than 100 professional opera performances.