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Building Shared Histories: Dioramas, Architectural Models, Collaboration, and Transatlantic African American Spaces, 1900–1940

Emily C. Burns

School of Visual Arts, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, USA; emily.burns@ou.edu

Abstract

Between 1900 and 1940, African American participants in transatlantic public exhibitions reclaimed a medium that often oppressed non-White bodies: the diorama. This essay traces a transatlantic conversation among African American artists about how to render Black history in diorama form, leveraging the miniature format to make political arguments. In diorama series which circulated on both sides of the Atlantic, such as those designed by Thomas W. Hunster for the Exhibit of American Negroes in the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900 and the Pan-American Exposition in 1901, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller for the Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition in 1907, and Charles C. Dawson for the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940, African American makers selectively used architectural models to signify histories of oppression and liberation as they told transatlantic stories about Black migration and enslavement. This essay argues that this set of dioramas is entwined, growing from 9 to 14 to 33, and that Hunster, Fuller, and Dawson all rendered archetypal buildings, such as slave cabins or plantation homes, to designate the wide and encompassing scope of oppression, while they reference singular buildings associated with public institutions from government to universities—the M Street School in Washington DC, Carnegie Library at Howard University, Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, the Old Massachusetts State House, and the White House—to signify and emplace spaces of Black liberation. Building on research on the layered functions of miniatures and drawing on burgeoning scholarship on entwinements between race and architecture, the article speculates on how architecture style signifies through the models to reinforce what James C. Scott has parsed as dominant narratives and hidden transcripts. Seeking to build Black futurity, all three series facilitated community participation and collaboration to produce an intersocial construction of transatlantic African American history built through mobile models of architecture.

Keywords: dioramas; exhibition history; African American history; race and mobility; race and the built environment

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1. Introduction

Between 1900 and 1940, African American participants in transatlantic public exhibitions reclaimed a medium that often oppressed non-White bodies: the diorama. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dioramas were most often associated with natural history and ethnographic museum spaces, such as in the "life groups" in the Anthropology display at the 1893 World's Fair and the later Hall of African People in New York's American Museum of Natural History (Étienne 2021; Hinsley and Wilcox 2016; Tunnicliffe

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and Scheersoi 2014). These displays often locked individuals into unchanging cultural curiosities. Human zoos at World's fairs, live performance spaces in Europe and the United States that featured communities from so-called primitive cultures to be observed by urban viewers as they purportedly went about daily life, operated as living dioramas (Blanchard et al. 2008; Cardon 2014). One still, the other dynamic, both exhibitionary environments reinforced perceptions of racial hierarchies bolstered by anthropological theories of human evolution. Both produced systematic constructions of difference and imposed primitivism in the name of taxonomic classification.

Art historian Noémie Étienne has explored how dioramas operate as "sites of mediation" that invite us to ask "How is historical and anthropological knowledge constructed and transmitted? What techniques and materials enable these transactions? . . . how do practices of space and image activate these dioramas and give them meaning?" (Étienne 2021, p. 21). Dioramas produce worlds in miniature, reimagining spatial geographies in micro scale. Encouraging viewers to interact with them, dioramas shape cultural behavior and memory (Étienne 2021, p. 21). With their accessibility, mimesis, and three-dimensionality, makers and viewers often declared models productively legible for wide audiences. In public exhibition spaces, they often affirmed normative and dominant narratives in society.

Dioramas can also challenge dominant narratives and hierarchies in societies with inequities. As James C. Scott shows, "subordinates in . . . large-scale structures of domination nevertheless have a fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant" and in this space "shared critique of domination may develop." Scott continues, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant (Scott 1990, p. xii). Expressed in coded terms, critique as an "infrapolitics" can be read even in the public discourse (Scott 1990, p. 19). Depending on the context of display and ongoing power dynamics, the scale and public format of dioramas can operate as a space of critique by articulating a "hidden transcript."

Research on miniatures points to how the small scale of dioramas render them unassuming and, concurrently, politically potent. The medium's accessibility, legibility, scale, and simulacrum of real life made it attractive for conversations challenging hierarchies. Étienne observes that dioramas can disrupt by producing "alternative discourses in the public space" (Étienne 2021, pp. 94–97). As anthropologist Jack W. Davy has explored, because miniature models always intend to be a representation of something chosen by the maker but without the prototype's complete function, they operate effectively as a "medium of non-verbal ideological communication" (J. Davy 2021, p. 169). Their interfacing between the viewer and prototype distills and "generate[s] broader implications while simultaneously reducing the distance between the audience and much larger, almost intractable patterns" (J. Davy 2021, p. 124). As Davy puts it, because the miniature defies literal function, it offers "a more powerful effect than the larger thing it resembles. . . the miniature's contextual relationships in the presence of an audience are the source of its power" (J. Davy 2021, p. 115). Lin Foxhall elaborates that "miniatures epitomize, echo and reverberate meaning captured in and associated with other objects, while creating new meanings of their own, which potentially enrich and alter both the miniature itself and its prototype" (Foxhall 2015, p. 1). The model, in other words, can shape perceptions of the form's original. Miniatures' small scale enables its intimacy with their viewer as they function as "metaphorical ideological devices" of "imaginative communication" (J. Davy 2021, p. 181; see also Grigsby 2012, p. 159; J. W. Davy 2018). As Davy with Charlotte Dixon articulate, miniatures are a "vector through which . . . complex ideologies could be reduced, simplified and directed on a scale with which humans can relate" (Davy and Dixon 2019, p. 3). Davy focuses on Indigenous miniatures produced in the Pacific northwest, but his

broader theorization of how miniatures operate as tools of translation, resistance, satire, and layered communication usefully apply to these African American dioramas, which are likewise trying to insert stories of overlooked histories of both oppression and of liberation into the public sphere.

By developing dioramas for World's Fair and exhibition spaces, African American organizers produced a transatlantic conversation about how to render Black history for wide publics (Wilson 2012; Ater 2011, pp. 40–41; Brundage 2003, pp. 1371, 1400). Taking up this medium to reinscribe these spaces of display, dioramas by Black designers subversively challenged prevalent race thinking at world's fairs that supported narratives tied to eugenics, even as they were at times constrained and circumscribed by the power of dominant discourse. As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage puts it, such dioramas "destabilize[d] the binary classification of civilization and 'the other', of modernity and primitiveness" (Brundage 2003, p. 1371). As architectural historian Mabel O. Wilson argues, in the period after the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States beginning in 1863, African Americans leveraged the public spaces of exhibitions to shape conversations about the historical and contemporary role of African Americans in U.S. society. As "cultural producers," Wilson writes, "Groups of black citizens formulated bold counternarratives to American progress. . . where disenfranchised blacks from across the African diaspora could imagine a world free from Euro-American subjugation" (Wilson 2012, p. 7). Intervening to contest framings of Black histories and cultures that were largely produced by White makers and that often criminalized and primitivized Africans and African Americans alike, Black artists, architects, and designers crafted alternative narratives that focused on self-representation, a sense of futurity through education, and demanded the inclusion of African Americans in tellings of U.S. history.[1] Archaeologist Christopher Evans observes that "the 'world in small' is inherently ambiguous" (C. Evans 2012, p. 379). African American diorama makers leveraged such ambiguity to produce new imaginaries and to make a case for inclusive narratives of African American history and experience in U.S. society. The reduced scale and care of making can also, for Susanne Küchler, "make manifest operational qualities that underpin the social body in the sense of making, repairing and caring for social relations in ways that proceed and are communicated without words" (Küchler 2019, p. 178). This phrasing expresses the political, social, and aesthetic utility that African American makers took up in using the medium for social commentary and engaging in societal discussion.

From the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900 to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, and from the Jamestown, Virginia Tercentennial Exposition of 1907 to the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940, diorama series made by African American artists explored and celebrated Black histories. Conceived for the "Exhibit of American Negroes" at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900, Washington DC artist Thomas W. Hunster's model series began a practice of using the diorama as an interruptive medium with nine models that subsequently traveled with parts of the "Exhibit of American Negroes" to Buffalo, New York. Sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller expanded the size of the diorama projects for a series of fourteen she designed after her studies in Paris for the Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition in 1907. In 1940, Charles C. Dawson participated in developing a monumental undertaking of 33 models for the Chicago American Negro Exposition. The dioramas built on each other, each one affirming and expanding on the episodes, producing a fungible and evolving narrative about African American history and cultural progress in the context of oppression.

With a focus on examples that explicitly engage the exterior structures of the built environment, whether domestic or public architecture, this essay traces these three entwined sets of dioramas designed by Hunster, Fuller, and Dawson to show how these African American makers carefully used architectural models to signify histories of oppression

and liberation as they told transatlantic stories about Black migration, enslavement, and autonomy. Not yet addressed in the scholarship on these dioramas (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, pp. 158–62; Ater 2011, pp. 37–41, 50–65; Brundage 2003; Burns 2022; Étienne 2021, pp. 94–97; Kasman 2021; Lawton 2017, p. 108; Loos et al. 2001; Schneider 2022; Wilson 2012, pp. 131–33), architectural models played a central role within the scenes. Setting the stage for narrative action and emplacing histories, the built environment literally articulated spaces for Black presence and agency. In the mobilities of the dioramas and photographs of them, they produced an expansive mobile geography (Burns 2022, pp. 11, 19), making at least metaphorical space available in a period of red-lining and societal and legal limitations on Black land ownership (Copeland 2013; Reid and Bennett 2012). More than that, designers' choices to render generic building types or replicas of specific buildings follow operative patterns. These choices functioned to either signal racial oppression to indicate the general state of life in the United States or transcendence from oppression in specific, singular and demonstrable instances in the construction of public historical memory of African American culture and identity. I argue that in these dioramas, archetypal buildings, often domestic architecture such as slave cabins or plantation homes, designate oppression. Sites of progress that do not fully represent actualization, such as early school buildings or rudimentary homes, are also rendered archetypally. Reference to specific buildings—such as the M Street School in Washington DC, Carnegie Library at Howard University, Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, the Old Massachusetts State House, and the White House—signify spaces of Black liberation.

The selection and rendering of architectural models based on specific prototypes in public spaces circulated styles like Romanesque revival and neoclassicism in miniature form, producing subtle commentary about public access to civic spaces. These choices point to the uneasy relationships between race and architecture increasingly being analyzed and critiqued by architectural historians showing how buildings and racism are entwined (Cheng et al. 2020; Davis 2019, pp. 13–21; Gleeson 2011). When these makers drew on specific architectural prototypes to express African American progress, they entered conversations about how ideas about race underwrite architectural style and design. They also point the paradox of how style served as a yardstick establishing levels of progress in human civilization; to express progress meant reinforcing such systems of understanding. These unresolved interventions raise but do not answer the question of who represents architecture's public.

Seeking to build Black futurity, all three series facilitated community participation and collaboration to construct an intersocial and intergenerational transatlantic African American history, literally shaping the formation of history, passing it on through exhibition, and making space for future mobilities. The role of collaboration resulted in part from the pragmatic exigency of undertaking such large-scale public projects in constricted time frames. It occurred in two main ways—the intellectual conversations generating the content for the dioramas and the material conversations producing and affixing the models. Both types of collaboration enacted a constellated network among African Americans. These shared conversations through making and exhibiting also indicate the metaphorical building of a shared history. As building is a collective enterprise, producing dioramas and building history invites construction of social collectives.

2. Thomas W. Hunster and Dioramas for the "Exhibit of American Negroes" 1900

The "Exhibit of American Negroes," in the Palace of Social Economy at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, comprised an array of media. The main gallery was about twelve feet wide and included framed charts and photographs, photographic books, texts published by African American authors, and other mixed media pieces designed to demonstrate

vibrant African American culture and life, with particular focus on the years following Emancipation in 1863 (Figure 1). Thomas Calloway, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Daniel Murray organized the display with a congressional budget of $15,000 for Group 16, class 110, which presented "public or private movements for the welfare of the people" (Peck 1901, vol. 2, p. 388). Calloway was a lawyer and U.S. War Department Clerk, Murray, a Librarian of Congress, and Du Bois an increasingly influential Black sociologist who demanded race equality (Grit 1899; Wilson 2012, pp. 84–84, 89–91; Bini 2014, p. 47; Travis 2004, pp. 14–16; Brundage 2008, pp. 1375–76). The exhibition won a gold medal for its category.



Figure 1. Exhibit of the American Negroes at the Paris Exposition, ca. 1900. Halftone photomechanical print, in DuBois 1900, p. 576. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC.

The exhibition operated as a public relations project (Provenzo 2013; Frioux-Salgas 2016; Rothenstein et al. 2019; Bini 2014; Bruce 2012). As the *Colored American* put it, "the colored man is on trial before the civilized world. American newspapers, filled with ill reports and prejudiced utterances relative to our people, reach the leading centers of thought among people of Europe… [who] are watching for evidence of our progress" (Negro Exhibit at Paris 1900b, p. 8). Du Bois summed the exhibit as "an honest, straightforward exhibit of a small nation of people, picturing their life and development, without apology or gloss, and above all made by themselves" (Du Bois 1900, p. 577). In his letter to possible contributors, Calloway clarified his intentions to emphasize "development" and "possibilities" for African American culture in the United States (Negro Exhibits 1899).

"To the Paris Exposition. . . thousands upon thousands will go," he wrote, "and a well selected and well prepared exhibit representing the Negro's development in his churches, his schools, his homes, his farms, his stores, his professions and pursuits in general will attract attention . . . and do a great and lasting good in convincing thinking people of the possibilities of the Negro" (Calloway 1900b, p. 2). Calloway's commentary reinforces what bell hooks later described as the use of representations to build a "counter-hegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images" (hooks 1994, pp. 45–46). To challenge stereotypes and racism, the curators centered on self-representation. To make their intervention enticing to wide audiences, organizers tested language about training European "statecraft. . .engaged in colonizing Africa," to recognize humankind's "equal chance in the race of life without regard to 'color, race or previous condition'" (Negro Exhibit at Paris 1900a, p. 381). This focus on development and civilization challenges the tendency in European metropoles to show Africans as primitive and needing external governance (Przyblyski 2001, pp. 213, 217–24) even as it acknowledged the assumptions that underwrote colonialism.

A photograph down the hallway hints at the display of nine small dioramas placed in a long case at left (Figure 2), "made of best French plate glass" noted 52 and 53 in the floor plan (Figure 3) (Calloway 1900b, p. 9). In his summary of the exhibit, Du Bois described them as "a series of striking models of the progress of the colored people, beginning with the homeless freedman and ending with the modern brick schoolhouse and its teachers" (Du Bois 1900, p. 576). Themes of progress and education tracked throughout the series of models, which were about eight to ten inches tall (Peck 1901, vol. 2, p. 409). One reporter explained that they comprised "miniature figures of persons, school-houses and surroundings," tracing episodes in the progress of African Americans in the United States through the built environment with the school as a metaphor: "from the most primitive backwoods hut to the finely-appointed and commodious colored high school building in Washington" (Negro Education 1899). While earlier exhibitions curated by African Americans had intervened in the exhibition circuit, notably the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895 (Wilson 2012, pp. 47–83), the Paris Exposition marked the first known use of dioramas to narrate Black history in an exhibitionary environment.

These clay models were designed and executed by painter Thomas W. Hunster and his African American students at the Washington DC "colored public school" on M Street (Figure 4), where Hunster taught alongside his successful career painting and exhibiting landscapes, still-lifes and portraits (S. L. Wormley 1951; Lawton 2017; Cosentino and Glassie 1983, pp. 172, 177; Hunster VF). He built an integrated arts curriculum which crossed fine art, manual and industrial arts, and across architectural and landscape drawing alike (G. S. Wormley 1932, p. 133; Feman 2021, pp. 110–11). As Seth Feman put it, Hunster encouraged "freehand drawings from direct observation and to produce imaginary designs" rather than transcriptions from existing manuals (Feman 2021, p. 110). This approach encouraged students' creative and critical thinking, as well as making space for them to make drawings imagining their future lives at work and play. In short, Hunster stimulated his African American students to think about and plan for their futures. Many became artists, including color field abstract painter Alma Thomas (Feman 2021). Furthermore, the project highlighted collaboration; students worked together and with Hunster to prepare the individual pieces of the dioramas and affix them to the model; this method brought to the foreground the metaphor of individual contributions to a collective and exploratory vision (An Interesting Display 1901). When the completed models were exhibited at the M Street School before being shipped to Paris, the *Washington Post* reported that they comprised "sixty-four human figures and horses and buildings, set in artistic landscapes" (An Art Exhibit 1900).



Figure 2. Façade of the Social Economy Section, Group XVI, Palace of Social Economy, in (Peck 1901, vol. 2, pp. 424–25). Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

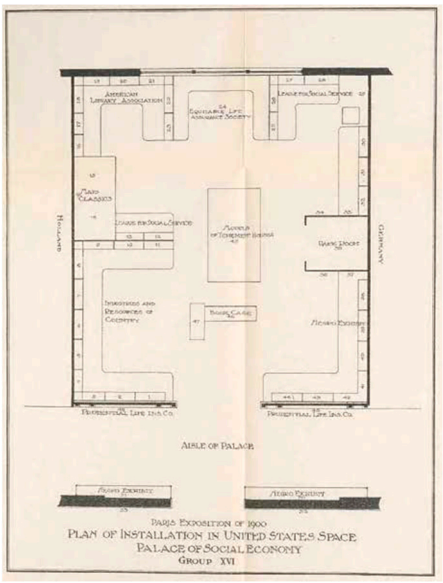


Figure 3. Plan of Installation in United States Space—Palace of Social Economy, Group XVI, in (Peck 1901, vol. 2, p. 390). Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

Recounting the details of the contents and reception of the exhibit, Calloway predicted this would be "the most attractive feature of all" (Calloway 1900a). Calloway proposed a hierarchy across the intermedia display across the Exhibit of American Negroes that declared these models the most legible and accessible, even beyond the photograph albums which have dominated the scholarly literature on the exhibition (Lewis and Willis 2003; Przyblyski 1998, 2001; S. M. Smith 1999, pp. 157–86; 2000, 2004, 2005; Wexler 1988; Wexler 2000, pp. 127–76; Guimond 1991, pp. 23–53). He described that due to their visual interest and placement in the hallway thoroughfare, "if thousands have looked at any other features of this exhibit, tens of thousands have studied these models. Dramatic tableaux of real life, they speak to the most ignorant visitor" (Calloway 1900b, p. 9; Calloway 1901, p. 77).

Because of their visual diorama structure with models, Calloway saw their stories as inherently comprehensible. The U.S. press described the models as evidence "of the rapid progress being made" in African American society (To Prove 1899). The French jury report on the Exposition's Palace of Social Economy also noted that the students made a model of a cotton press (Worms 1902, p. 293). After the exhibition closed, U.S. Commissioner of Education W.T. Harris asked to make a display of the dioramas in his office in Washington DC (Calloway 1900b, p. 9; For Paris Exposition 1900). The models are not extant, but six of the nine are visible under the counter in the Exhibit's later iteration in the 1901 Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo (Figures 5 and 6), where they presented "the evolution of the negro from emancipation to the present time" lit "by electric lamps" (Ross 1901; Loos et al. 2001; Travis 2004, pp. 71–75; Wilson 2012, pp. 116–19).

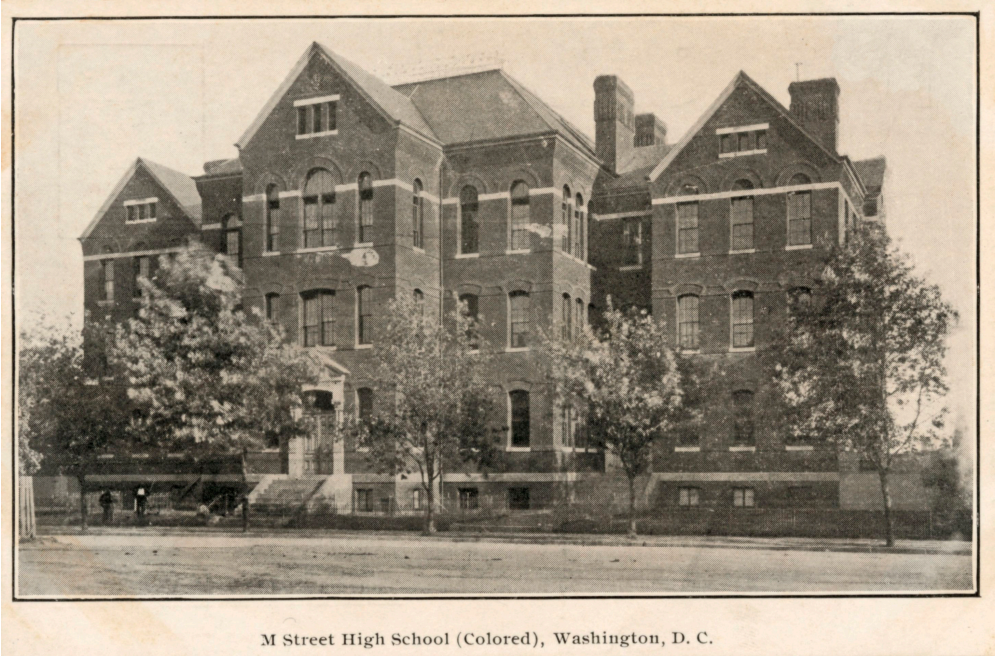


Figure 4. Photograph of M Street High School, Washington DC, c. 1906. postcard, public domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M_Street_High_School_(colored)_Washington,_DC_1906.jpg, accessed on 15 June 2025.

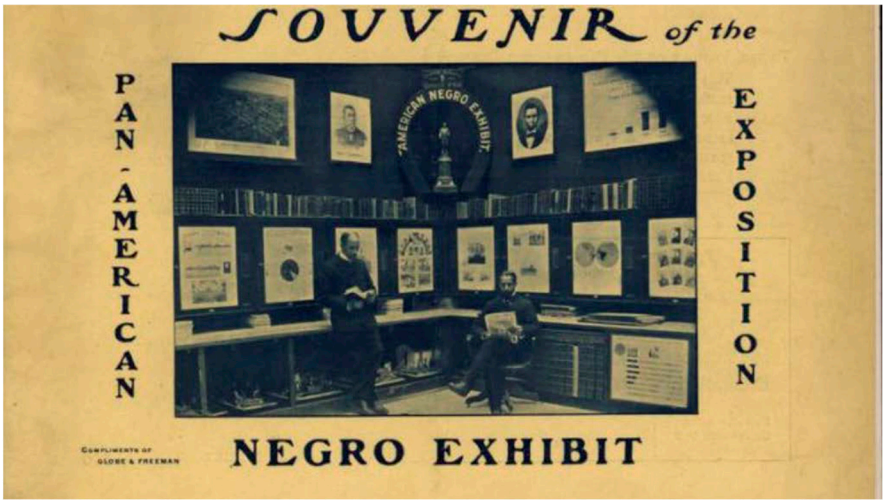


Figure 5. Photograph of the Negro Exhibit at the Pan-American Exposition. Cover of Ross 1901. Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, https://digital.buffalolib.org/document/2100#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-3946,-225,9271,4257, accessed on 2 October 2025.



Figure 6. American Negro Exhibit which was Shown at Paris. *Colored American Magazine* 3–4 (1901–2): 378.

Though the only known photographs of the models do not permit detailed study, it is clear how important architecture is in place-making across them. Each scene is neat and self-contained, with the figural action often taking place in front of model buildings. Over the series, the architecture becomes larger and takes up more space. Calloway's detailed description in the *Colored American* enables their partial semantic reconstruction. Calloway explains that the first model depicts the origin point of "a family of ex-slaves just emancipated. Just behind them are woods representing the darkness of slavery, and before them is a winding path leading into an unknown future." A baby signifies a mother's "first joy of freedom" and a young boy, the character whose "development" will be conveyed in the additional models. Calloway's description clarifies how the built environment allegorized the series' argument. From a "rude home" to a "first schoolhouse," the models evolve to a "neat home" and "neat white schoolhouse with glass windows and brick chimney and cheerful children," the young boy now acting as the schoolteacher for the group (Calloway 1900b, p. 9). The *Evening Star* in Washington DC summarized that the models aimed to "exhibit the development of the public school system and its effect on the home life of the colored people from a period immediately after the close of the civil war to the present date" (For Paris Exposition 1900).

The final model features the "large commodious building of the Washington Colored High School," with the boy, now an adult, as principal (Calloway 1900b, p. 9; Our Paris Exhibit 1900; Lewis 1900). The diorama depicting the school where the dioramas themselves were produced is visible to the far right of the set in Figure 6, adjacent to photograph albums. The M Street school had been constructed in brick in 1890–91, with Romanesque revival round arches with visible archivolts framing the upper story windows (Figure 4). Highlighting the importance of government support for education, the school was the first publicly funded school for African American students supported by a congressional appropriation. Its design highlighted, for a contemporary, "a beautiful house of Philadelphia pressed brick, ornamented with sandstone and constructed upon modern principles," linking aesthetics with functionality (Colored High School 1891, p. 2). The style of Richardsonian Romanesque, then *au courant* following the work of Boston-based architect Henry Hobson Richardson, was often employed for public and civic spaces, from libraries and schools to churches and railway stations (O'Gorman 1987). In its ties to European architecture of the medieval period, its dense masonry and round arches implied stability.

Though the M Street School's design was more cost-effective because it was developed by Washington DC's inspector of public buildings instead of an architectural firm (Colored High School 1891, p. 2), these Romanesque revival details aligned with these public spaces by following the dispersion of the revival aesthetic in its applied elements. As many of its students went to northeastern colleges, its design underlined the school as a springboard to continued elite education. Its well-appointed and supplied classrooms and highly educated teachers propelled students into successful secondary education and careers. As historian Henry Robinson observes, "many of these graduates achieved prominence in the local Washington community, others in the national and international communities, while a few ranked among the first Afro-Americans to obtain eminence in their respective professions" (Robinson 1984, p. 120). In a history of the school, Mary Church Terrell described it as "a great blessing, not only to those representatives of the race who live under the shadow of the capitol, but to many elsewhere" (M. C. Terrell 1917, p. 266). Hunster and his students highlight that success by placing a model of this building into the final diorama. Perhaps deliberately, the last two models that turn the corner of the exhibit as it was installed in Buffalo (Figures 5 and 6), also mark key turning points in Hunster's curated African American history, as representing "thirty-five years after slavery there is shown to us in models 8 and 9 a group of the pupils and the principal and building of the Washington Colored High School" (Calloway 1901, p. 77). A viewer of the Negro Exhibit at the Pan-American Exposition noted that the last models included "three cadets and three young women pupils" (Advance of the Negro 1901).

The dioramas provided a narrative of African American progress through education. In the context of the larger exhibition, which Du Bois summed "marks an era in the history of the Negroes of America" (Du Bois 1900, p. 577), the dioramas centered era-making, intending to mark histories of oppression and the keystones of progress and liberation. The growing child serves as a metaphor for the growth of African American culture. Earlier dioramas generalize the history of the individual figure as a metonym for Black histories in the United States by including a slave cabin and forested area. The progress culminates with a specific site, then in use. This translation from the generic to specific distinguished between pasts of oppression and present and futures of education and access to public resources. In this way, a metaphorical landscape of Black education migrated to Paris for public display and a symbol not only of Black presents, but also of futurity enabled by the progressive school (Strait and Conwill 2023; Frazier 2025).

The series may be partly modeled on the life of then M Street School principal, Robert Heberton Terrell (1857–1925). Terrell's father, Harrison Terrell, had been enslaved and freed in the 1850s.[2] Robert Terrell was raised in Virginia until the Civil War, and later moved to Washington DC. He was a student at the Preparatory High School established in 1870 that became the M Street School (M. C. Terrell 1917, p. 259), where he taught in the 1880s after completing his undergraduate degree at Harvard, where he met and married civil rights activist Mary Church (Robinson 1984, p. 122). After earning a law degree at Howard University, he worked in Washinton DC for the U.S. Treasury and in private practice before serving as principal of the M Street School from 1899 to 1901. Terrell was overseeing the school while Hunster and his students were conceiving of and completing the models to send to Paris during the winter of 1899–1900. Terrell's writings around this period articulate parallel messages to the models. In 1903, he gave an address in Memphis, "A Glance at the Past and Present of the Negro," in which he stated, "The progress of the Negro since his emancipation is a marvellous story. . . the Negro has been able to give a striking evidence of his ability for a self-developing American citizenship" (R. H. Terrell 1903). Terrell's life, education, and role in school administration made his story a viable model for the diorama's narrative and message.

Reviews herald the models as a display of Black development after Emancipation. One later writer described that the models "attracted the attention of artists and scientists by the exquisite finish and truth for detail" and that they impressed with "the historical accuracy of the buildings"; "exquisite models of the human figures and horses"; "faithful portrayal of artistic landscapes"; and "correctness of every detail" (S. L. Wormley, p. 5). Another stated that the pupils themselves posed for the figures and "the buildings are historically correct, and every detail has been faithfully portrayed" (An Art Exhibit 1900). Emphasis on specific sites and sitters lends a documentary air to the story. Fellow teacher and, by 1901, principal at the M Street school, Anna Julia Cooper, who was a formerly enslaved person, celebrated the model's narrative (Gable 1982; S. Y. Evans 2008; Giles 2006; Moody-Turner 2009; Robinson 1984, pp. 122–24). In 1892, Cooper published *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*, which was listed among the many books in Daniel Murray's pamphlet listing published African American authors available in the Exhibit of American Negroes (Cooper 1892; Murray 1900). Traveling to London for the first Pan-African Congress and to Paris to see the Exposition, she attended a dinner for African Americans hosted at the U.S. pavilion in Paris, at which Fuller, Du Bois, and Calloway were in attendance (Bini 2014, pp. 62–64; Colored American Dine 1900). Cooper described the last model depicting the M Street School as the "climax of the upward struggles of [her] people. . ." and the "chasm bridged in the second generation along the shadowy path" (Cooper 1901; Hutchinson 1981, pp. 114–15). Reinvigorating the trajectory of education and self-determination at the center of Hunster's models, Cooper later completed her doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris with a dissertation on French perceptions of enslavement after the French Revolution (Cooper 1925). In her 1892 book, she optimistically suggested that U.S. society offered "possibilities and promise . . . inherent in the system" that would enable a future ideal of equality in the United States, with "promise abundant and possibilities infinite" (Cooper 1892, pp. 11–12). Cooper uses narratives of U.S. progress as a space of possibility for Black life in ways that align with the M Street school models' focus on education.

Hunster's and his students' models visualized in pictorial form ongoing conversations among Black intellectuals and activists in Washington DC and in the Black press around 1900. Exploring strategies of place-making through the built environment was one strategy to show progress from a long past of rampant oppression into spaces of individuality, autonomy, choice and self-determination. Their function to make an argument through visual representation rather than text reached a broader audience of fairgoers and also set the stage for individuals visiting the larger Exhibit of American Negroes inside the nearby room. Across the hallway from some of the charts, or "data portraits" made by Du Bois and students at Atlanta University (visible at the right of Figure 2), they offered more accessible depictions of a similar argument about the ways African Americans have made space for themselves in U.S. society during Reconstruction. The sociological charts focused on translating statistics about African American land ownership, population, and access to resources (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018; Forrest 2018; Arabindan-Kesson 2021, pp. 158–59), while the dioramas made geographies of land ownership and institutional access material through the spatial transfer of the dioramas and their architectural models enactments of place and space. Marking the years 1865 to 1900, the nine models set the stage for framing histories of recent Black history, present and future. While the models are not extant, they began transatlantic conversations of diorama-making to tell wider and longer histories of African Americans in subsequent exhibitions, such as when they were taken up by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller for the Jamestown Ter-Centennial in 1907. The use of archetypal buildings to designate spaces of oppression and of specific buildings to highlight opportunity, triumph, and cultural currency increased Fuller's designs.

3. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Dioramas for the Jamestown Ter-Centennial 1907

While it is unknown if Hunster and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, an African American sculptor from Philadelphia, explicitly met, the two are entwined in exhibition geographies between the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900 and the Jamestown Ter-Centennial in 1907. The later exhibition highlighted the 300th anniversary of Jamestown's founding as the first White settlement in what became the United States (Wilson 2012, pp. 127–34; Ater 2011, pp. 41–50; Brundage 2008, pp. 1372–76; Thompson 1907b). Fuller designed a series of fourteen dioramas relaying African American history and Hunster exhibited some paintings, including five portraits, and developed a new exhibition of student-made models from the M Street School to be shown beneath additional paintings (Figure 7a,b). Both used the opportunity to exhibit at the Ter-Centennial to build their careers.



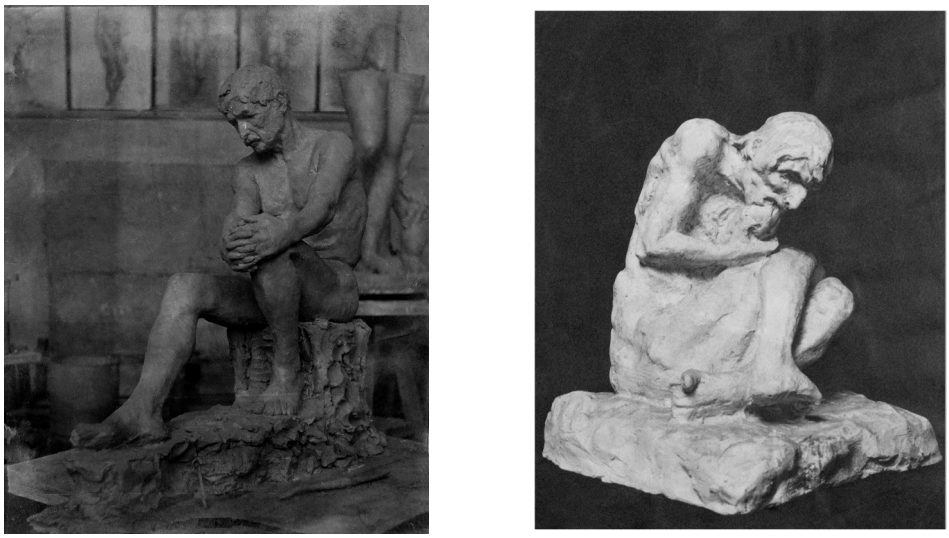
(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 7. (**a**) View of M Street School model series, 1907 Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition (**b**) Oil Paintings by Prof. T.W. Hunster of Washington DC, both in (Jackson and Davis 1908, pp. 241, 256).

Fuller not only saw the dioramas from the M Street school in Paris where she was studying sculpture since 1899. At the request of Calloway and Du Bois, she worked on them to repair damage incurred during the transatlantic passage (Ater 2011, p. 17; Brundage 2008, p. 1379; Kerr 1986, pp. 97–98; Dannett 1964, p. 13). In addition to spending significant time with Fuller visiting the Exposition and inviting her to the dinner for African Americans hosted at the U.S. Pavilion along the Seine in August (Colored American Dine 1900), Calloway and Du Bois both became patrons commissioning sculpture from the artist in succeeding decades (Ater 2011, p. 18; Kerr 1986, pp. 97–99). One article discussing the Exhibit of American Negroes mentioned seeing some of Fuller's models in the space (Lewis 1900, p. 1). In this period, Fuller produced large scale studies of human figures (Figure 8a,b) as well as several sculptural works of figures in agony (reproduced in Ater 2011, p. 20, Figure 3, p. 21, Figures 4 and 5; O'Donnell 1907); academic studies or emotive plasters, or both, may have been included, even if in a temporary capacity, in exhibit-related events.

When Calloway was commissioned to organize the Negro Building for the Ter-Centennial exhibition, he contracted Fuller to produce the dioramas (Ater 2011, p. 50; Brundage 2008, p. 1376; Dannett 1964, pp. 16–17). In her Philadelphia studio, Fuller molded about one hundred and thirty figures in plaster, each between sixteen and twenty-four inches tall (Ater 2011, p. 37; Schneider 2022, 2025). A recently uncovered photograph depicts Fuller in the studio looking upward as she molds a figure on a wooden pedestal (Figure 9). Two additional models are visible on the table behind her. Erika Schneider iden-

tifies these three as part of the twenty-four figures in the first diorama scene of *The Landing of the First Twenty Slaves at Jamestown* (Figure 10) (Schneider 2022). Fuller's dioramas—which traced, for one of the exhibition organizers, "a number of significant incidents in the career of the negro in this country and modeled in plaster peculiarly appropriate figures to represent him in each stage of his advancement" (cited in Ater 2011, p. 50)—won acclaim and a gold medal at the exhibition. As the *New York Age* described the installation, the figurines were given "a background of skillful paintings to give the necessary environment" and "are shown in a specially constructed subway, and are lighted by subdued electric bulbs, which give them a most impressive character" (Thompson 1907a, p. 2). The lighting and framing recall a stage set to draw visitors into the scenes.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 8. (**a**) Photograph of Meta Vaux Warrick, *Etude*, c. 1900, 4.74 × 3.09 in. From the scrapbook of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. Collection of the Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University, gift from Carnel Hoover (**b**) Meta Warrick Fuller, *Secret Sorrow*, or *Man Eating His Heart*, c. 1900, painted plaster, 7 × 3 × 2 in., Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, Massachusetts.

Many of the chronological scenes follow examples from Hunster's trajectory, but are revised, expanded, and larger scale at about ten feet by ten feet for each diorama and some figures reaching two feet tall (Ater 2011, p. 37). As Terrell's address in 1903 began narrating African American history with 1619 due to the arrival of enslaved people from Africa to the continent, Fuller begins her series with this moment (R. H. Terrell 1903). Calloway described that the commission intended the series to chart "the progress of the Negro in America from the landing at Jamestown to the present time" (Brundage 2003, p. 1376). By beginning here, the scene complicates settler celebrations of British immigrants arriving at Jamestown by reminding viewers that this episode also marks trafficking enslaved Africans to the same place (Hannah-Jones 2021). This history also situates Fuller's model in place, building a trajectory from 1619 to 1907. As art historian Renée Ater has shown, Fuller's project underscored the "positive effects of improved environment, an emphasis on the clothed body, the ideology of racial uplift, and the interpretation of black history as an 'ethical awakening'" in ways that align with and expand on Hunster's models (Ater 2011, p. 37). Period reviews connected the two, noting the "a small series of a like nature was displayed at the Paris Exposition" (Miss Meta 1907) that "attracted great attention from the social economists of the Old World" (Negro History 1907). Fuller's models likewise garnered a lot of media attention (Wilson 2012, pp. 131–34; Kerr 1986, pp. 147–51, 171–84; Ater 2011, pp. 65–71).



Figure 9. Photograph of the studio of Meta Vaux Warrick, Philadelphia, PA, c. 1907 2.25 × 2.9 in. From the scrapbook of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. Collection of the Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University, gift from Carnel Hoover.



Figure 10. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Landing of the First Twenty Slaves at Jamestown*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 18).

As Ater and Brundage have argued, Fuller's models affirmed White narratives of Black progress and focused on select class stories. The artist follows expectations of church-going and middle-class respectability (Ater 2011, pp. 39, 51). Brundage observes, "For all of Warrick's representational experimentation, her tableaux followed closely, and indeed were constrained by, the conventions of contemporary textual narratives of black progress and history. A preoccupation with displaying black middle-class respectability, diligence, and cultural refinement foreclosed any possibility that the full range of black life-styles, talents, and circumstances could be acknowledged in Warrick's scenes" (Brundage 2008, p. 1371). Over the series, Fuller's figures increasingly range in shades of Blackness within each diorama. This visual strategy offers a complex understanding of variability and multiplicity within African American communities rather than singular Blackness, which

the photographs at the Exhibit of American Negroes in Paris in 1900 also brought into the foreground (S. M. Smith 2004, pp. 61–62). At the same time, scholars have observed, this range participates in social conversations about racial mixing; as Ater argues, at times this lightened skin tone may align with cultural conversations about lightness signifying progress and civilization (Ater 2011, pp. 51, 54). Accepting these circumscriptions and limitations on what could be explicitly stated about histories of racial oppression in a public venue, Fuller found ways to leverage the settings of her dioramas to support her arguments about racial progress. Taking up the medium of the diorama itself as material storytelling, one reviewer noted, offered the series a "concrete form" of history (Life Groups 1907, p. 43). While critics tended to focus on the expression of the figure's themselves (Historic Tableaux 1907, p. 517), the role of architecture played as significant, if not more subtle, role in the series' argument.

Fuller's diorama series uses the built environment metaphorically, both critiquing societal boundaries (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, pp. 158–59) and celebrating the ways that African American communities outshone them. Some of the scenes feature construction as the subject, including the *Freedman's First Cabin* (Figure 11), in which the figures assemble the first logs for a home. This subject aligns with one of the early models in the M Street School series that depicted a "rude cabin" (Calloway 1900b, p. 9). Likewise, *Contractors and Builders* (Figure 12), depicts four figures working on a house with more processed wood boards (Ater 2011, p. 63). The progressive refinement of the architecture enacts a metaphor of progress, and building is also metaphorical from a "small log cabin to a larger home" and traversing enslavement from the colonial era to the Civil War, to the beginning of schools, concluding with a graduation ceremony.

Fuller's designs also called for more generic sites in *The Beginning of Negro Education* (Figure 13), where groups of children arrive to a log cabin school in a scene reminiscent of Hunster's (Ater 2011, p. 59). Reviewers described the more rural and rudimentary log cabin school as "primitive" (Miss Meta 1907) and "a sorry looking, ramshackle affair" (Blacks Conducting 1907). The diorama resonates, as Ater has shown, with postcards that circulated from the Jamestown Tercentennial that refigured Black servitude and rural identity (Figure 14). As Ater puts it, "these images represented African Americans tied to the land as manual laborers and looked nostalgically backward, toward the old, pre-Civil War social order" (Ater 2011, p. 43).

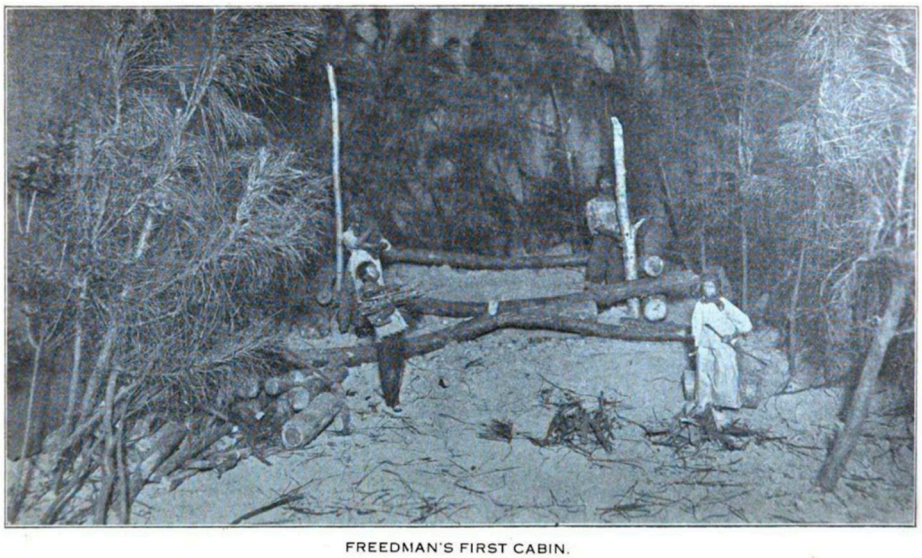


Figure 11. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Freedman's First Cabin*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 75).

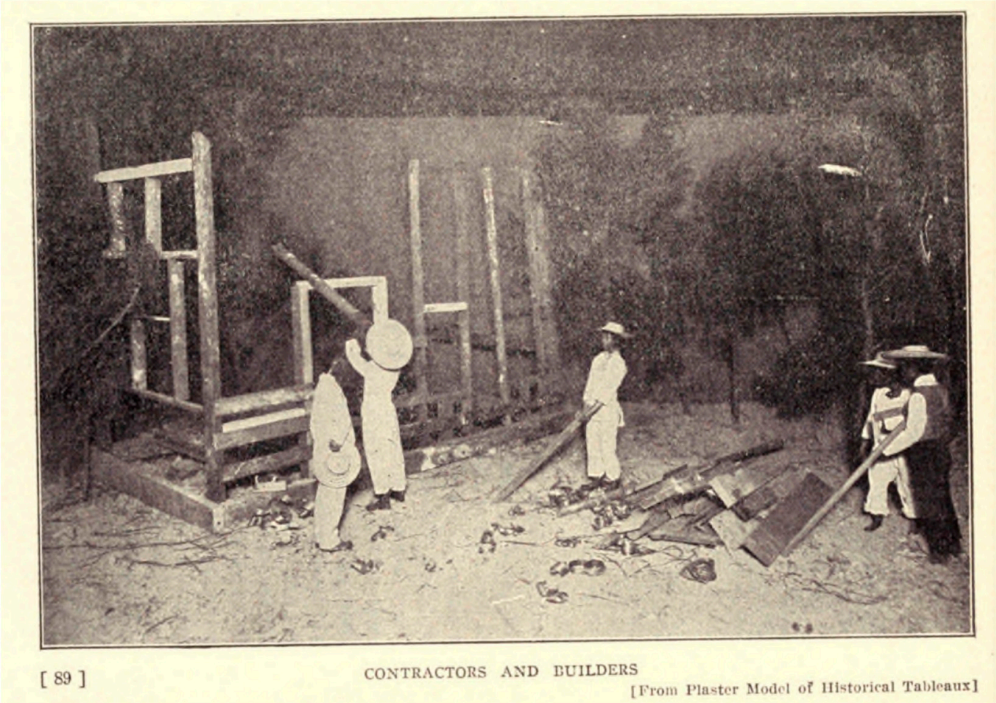


Figure 12. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Contractors and Builders*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 85).

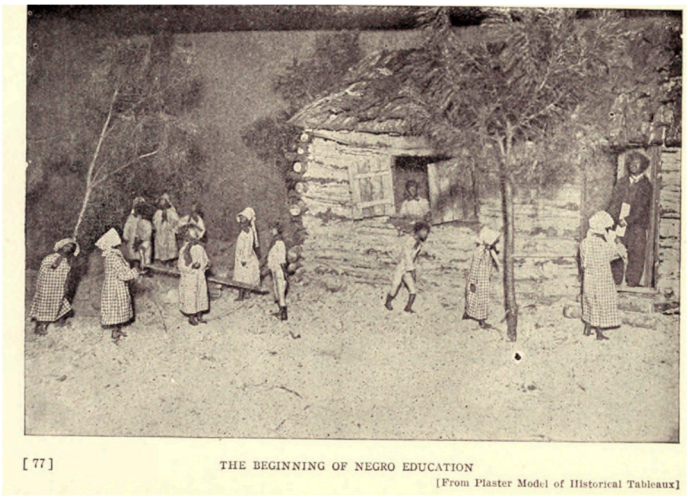


Figure 13. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *The Beginning of Negro Education*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 73).

These structures are archetypal, generalizing the story as indicating wide swaths of African American experience. Likewise, the scene *Defending Master's Home in the Civil War* (Figure 15) includes the action of enslaved people protecting the White family and homestead (Ater 2011, p. 56; Brundage 2008, pp. 1386–89) occurring in front of an archetypal plantation house with thin Georgian columns and a two-story portico, with slave cabins visible in the background to the right, anchoring enslaved people to place while highlighting segregation with the boundary wall between spaces. Such depictions of archetypes of the past and imagined pre-civilized or progressively civilized spaces contrast the greater specificity that builds by the end of the series. Powerfully, Fuller's diorama of figures cotton picking in plantations has no backdrop at all (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, p. 162, Figure 3.21)—making this icon of enslavement and repression ubiquitous.



Figure 14. Jamestown Amusement & Vending Co. Inc., Postcard of *Negro Log Cabin*, 8.8 cm. × 13.8 cm., Donald G. Larson Collection on International Expositions and Fairs, World's Fair Collection, University of California, Fresno, https://calisphere.org/item/8dcc61ee79c39f12b9da0305a71b7b77/, accessed on 30 July 2025.

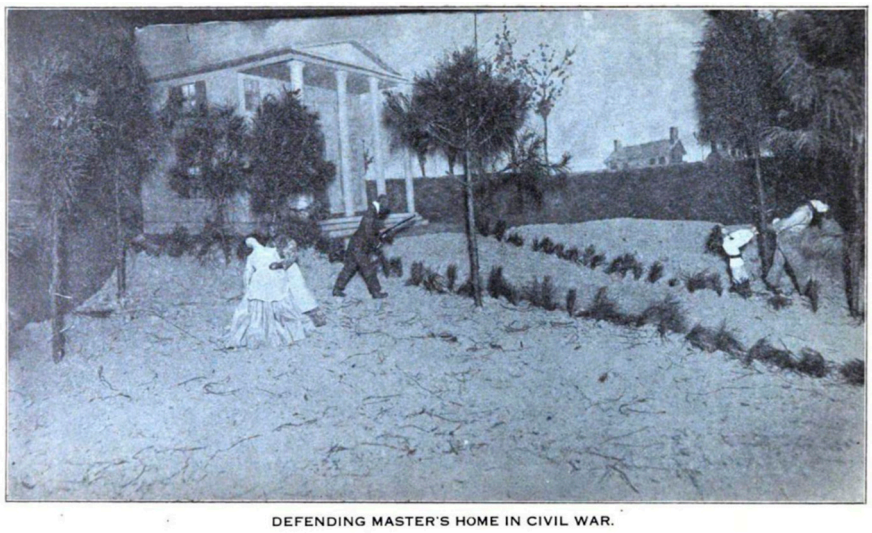


Figure 15. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Defending Master's Home in Civil War*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 24).

As Fuller becomes more specific about siting these institutions, her use of architecture points to progressive professionalization. Across these later scenes, Ater shows, "Fuller asserts the importance of improved surroundings, through such institutions as churches, schools, and homes, on black life" (Ater 2011, p. 39). The specificity affirms narratives of progress over the diorama series from distant past of sites of repression, improvements, and present episodes articulating Black presence and Black futures. In these scenes, as in the choice of the M Street School in Hunster's series, specific buildings link to public life in worship and education and tie with Romanesque revival, as well as neoclassicism.

Some of the sites Fuller references may be tied to her birthplace of Philadelphia, where she began art training at the Drexel School of Fine Arts, as she localizes the story partly through her own biography and experience. For example, Fuller expands from Hunster's model and takes up architectural specificity in representing the role of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in the development of African American culture. Two of the fourteen models relate to that history, including an interior scene, "organizing a church in a Blacksmith's shop" (Ater 2011) and an exterior view, "An After Church Scene"

(Figure 16). The blacksmith shop scene refers to the AME history in which Reverend Richard Allen (1760–1832) convened worshippers first in a blacksmith shop on Sixth Street in Philadelphia in 1794 (Newman 2008; Ater 2011, p. 56; Brundage 2008, p. 1389). Allen is rendered alongside clergyman Absalom Jones (1746–1818). The exterior view (Figure 16) depicts figures gathered in front of a church façade and row of trees. Reviews highlight references to the first African Episcopal church, founded in Philadelphia in 1816 (Miss Meta 1907). A new Richardsonian Romanesque style church, Mother Bethel, designed by Hazlehurst & Huckel, opened in Philadelphia in 1890 (Figure 17).[3] In Fuller's diorama, the slightly foreshortened building at right backgrounds well-dressed figures with an array of skin tones, crossing each other on the street. The Romanesque arch over the doorway of Mother Bethel is suggested, as are the slight rectangular windows above and to the sides of the doorway. While not an exact replica of the building, Fuller hints at the site, and the prominence of a large-scale stone church, with these architectural features following the same aesthetic used for the M Street School (Figure 4). In both cases, these aesthetic choices translated into the models affirmed permanence and stability.



Figure 16. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *An After Church Scene*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 69).

The final scene attaches the graduation ceremony to a specific place: Howard University in Washington DC, which opened in 1867 (Figure 18). While most of the figures across the dioramas do not appear to be portraits, excepting clergymen and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar who is in *Improved Home Life* (Ater 2011, p. 62, Figure 32), the central figure in the commencement is recognizably Frederick Douglass, wearing a tuxedo and posed in conversation. Brundage suggests that the choice of Howard University and of Douglass, a member of the University Board of Trustees from 1872 to 1895, operates as a statement in favor of liberal arts education instead of the industrial and vocational training advocated by Booker T. Washington to build a Black class of laborers (Brundage 2003, p. 1394). By emphasizing Douglass, who was associated with the liberal arts model espoused by Du Bois, Fuller subtly weighs in on this hotly debated question (Travis 2004, pp. 3–4, 19–26, 65). The central portico with pediment and three bays of rectangular inset windows flanking each side resonate with Howard University's Carnegie Library, which opened in 1910 (Figure 19) (Robinson and Edwards 1996, p. 223).[4] While the site was not yet built, its funding was being negotiated by Howard University President Wilber P. Thirkield (1854–1936) as Fuller was working on the models (Carnegie Library 1907; For Howard University 1907). Fuller perhaps saw a projected plan already in the works as

funding was negotiated or she aligned the aesthetics with the building type of Carnegie libraries then being constructed in many towns and university campuses across the United States (Van Slyck 1995), such as the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, now CLP-West End, which was designed by Alden & Harlow and opened in 1899 (Van Slyck 1995, p. 108), and public libraries built in Clarinda, Iowa (1907–1909), Huron, South Dakota (1909); Missouri Valley, Iowa (c. 1910), and Cumberland, Wisconsin. This neoclassical façade juxtaposes the one in the plantation house in the earlier diorama figuring enslavement (Figure 15). Instead of private wealth and a space of oppression, the stately neoclassicism that circulated in Carnegie library design highlighted the aesthetic as a statement of civilization, public space, and education. Fuller's label for the model, which described that "the negro has shown by his personal endeavor to secure the highest and best education that he does not differ from other races in his aspirations" (Blacks Conducting 1907; Ater 2011, p. 65), connects with this built environment—even an imminently opening site—as the space of education, learning and futurity.

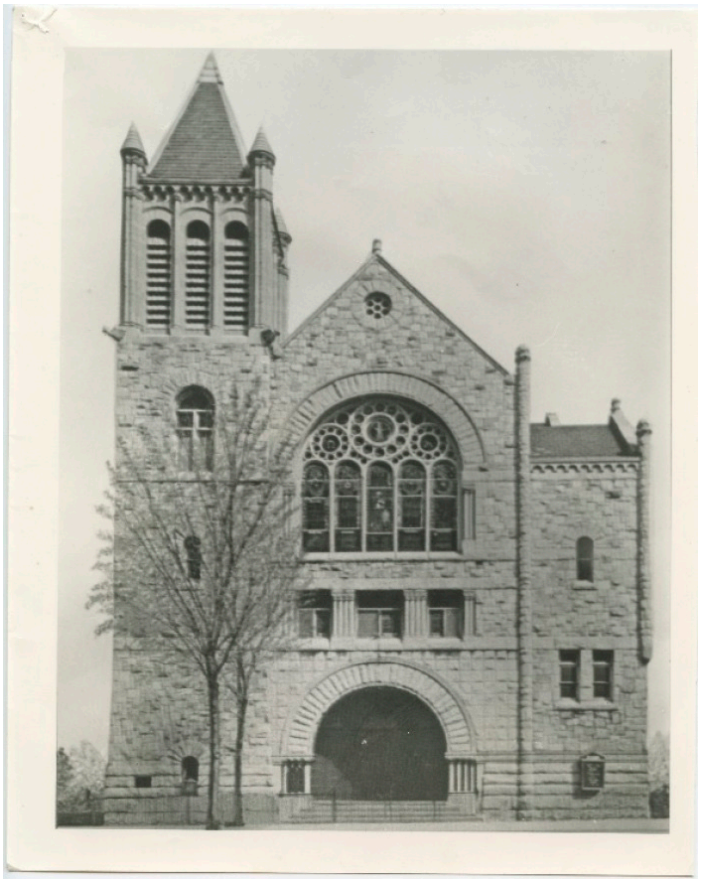


Figure 17. Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, 1890, photograph from 1960s, Mother Bethel Richard Allen Museum Archives, Philadelphia, https://www.christianpost.com/news/pcusa-digitizes-records-of-historic-mother-bethel-ame-church.html, accessed on 15 August 2025.

The façade in Fuller's commencement scene also parallels in smaller scale the very building where dioramas would be displayed: the Negro Building at the Jamestown Tercentennial (Figure 20). This building shares the central, classicizing portico. Designed by Texas architect William Sidney Pittman, who also attended Drexel, this commission marked "the first Black architect awarded a federal contract" (Falcone 2016; Ater 2011, pp. 47, 49; Brundage 2008, p. 1373). If this structure was also a model for Fuller's background, it suggests a self-referential, even meta, dialogue with the site in which visitors would be

viewing her dioramas. It highlights the key role of education in university study and the didactic role of Negro Buildings in broader exhibitionary environments (Wilson 2012), as it tracks the professionalization of African Americans in the Reconstruction period. The specific and concrete nature of these later scenes' referents in the Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia and Carnegie Library as well as Howard University's campus also link to the material forms on display throughout the Negro Building. As Brundage puts it "these models re-created in miniature the social context out of which emerged the plethora of manufactured goods, handicrafts and arts that stuffed the exhibits in the Negro Building" (Brundage 2008, p. 1391). The specificity focused on localizing and claiming spaces where African American agentic and autonomous culture and experience operated, using dominant architectural styles for public buildings to elevate those spaces.



Figure 18. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Commencement Day*, The Warrick Tableaux (lost), 1907. Reproduced in (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 82).



Figure 19. Howard University Carnegie Library, 1911, clipping, 5 × 2.7 in., American Library Association Archives, RS. 85/7/6, Box 102, Folder He-HO, 1905–1928, https://archon.library.illinois.edu/ala/?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=3901, accessed on 15 August 2025.

These references to neoclassicism are complex. This broad term, William Fitzgerald explores, refers to aesthetics in architecture and design that by the nineteenth century form "a physical presence that haunts our built environment," often unremarked and operating subliminally (Fitzgerald 2022, pp. 5–6). In its references to the Greco-Roman world, especially in public architecture, it linked modern societies to idealized ancient civilizations. It was a style favored for federal buildings in the Early Republic and in the Beaux-Arts architecture of fin-de-siècle building of civic spaces like public libraries. Its links to Greco-Roman antiquity with white and light gray stone, to presumed "neutrality" and eternity, and intellectual claims to universality reinforced ideas of White cultural authority and making it an attractive aesthetic tool for many Western governments (Fitzgerald 2022, p. 50; Cheng et al. 2020, p. 19). As Irene Cheng, Charles Davis and Wilson put it, there are "limitations and paradoxes in neoclassicism's capacity to embody human reason and freedom vis-à-vis race" (Cheng et al. 2020, p. 5). As Susan F. Buck Morss and Tyler Stovall have both explored, Enlightenment rhetoric and its ties to ideals of the Greco-Roman past and human autonomy express paradoxes because of the ethos of liberty's exclusions due to racial hierarchies and the institution of slavery (Buck-Morss 2009; Stovall 2021).

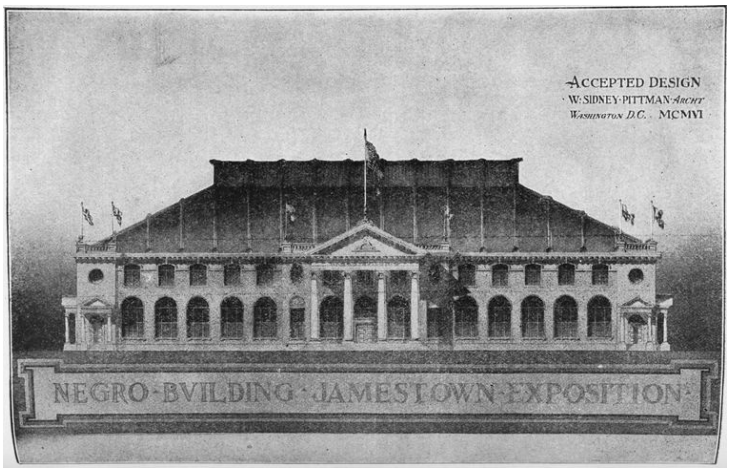


Figure 20. *Negro Building, Jamestown Exposition,* Reproduced in Giles B. Jackson, and D. Webster Davis. *The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States* Richmond: Virginia Press, 1908. Issued 1911. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, New York Public Library, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e4-4fba-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99, accessed on 15 August 2025.

In this vein, architectural historians Mabel Wilson and Peter Minosh have analyzed how neoclassical aesthetics employed for civic buildings in the early United States, like the Virginia State Capitol and the U.S. Capitol buildings, which were built by enslaved laborers, signified the authority of Whiteness in the government (Wilson 2020, pp. 25, 41; Minosh 2020, pp. 43–44). Wilson shows how such sites crystalize and make spatial "the productive relationship between democratic ideals and racial difference" with their emphasis on European legacies to emphasize "virtues of durability, utility, and beauty" (Wilson 2020, pp. 26, 33). Minosh likewise analyzes "how the [U.S.] Capitol operates among the set of cultural, economic, and material phenomena that configured the social imaginaries that we call racial whiteness and blackness," linking ideas of race with the philosophical discourses that subtended idealist claims of the new republic (Minosh 2020, p. 44). In aligning with the Enlightenment context that elevated Greco-Roman aesthetics as an ideal, Minosh and others suggest, designers and builders connected with concurrently constructed race hierarchies in burgeoning fields of anthropology and ethnography (Cheng et al. 2020, pp. 5, 9). For Minosh, Black enslaved labor and wider exclusion from the American political body became

embedded in the Capitol's architecture, articulating the "irresolvable crisis between the enlightened Republic and its foundation within a regime of chattel slavery" (Minosh 2020, p. 44). For Minosh, the incompatibility between the ideal and the reality of enforced labor that built the site remains materially echoed. Leveraging the style's associations with universality, neoclassical aesthetics "fashioned a regime of violence as disinterested reason of the democratic republic" (Minosh 2020, p. 56). These powerful studies linking race and architecture, and, more specifically, Whiteness, racism, and neoclassicism raise important questions for these dioramas' favoring of neoclassical structures.

What did it mean for Fuller and other African American designers to engage with neoclassicism by rendering models of sites key to African American history that used this aesthetic? Using the language of cosmopolitan, Enlightenment modernity, diorama builders took up this aesthetic for African American civic culture as they insisted upon inclusion and equality. It may have elevated and made legible the status of progressive Black culture for diorama viewers. In the process, however, as Kasman notes, the "classical Greek architectural elements. . . normalize assimilation of African American visual language into the white sphere" (Kasman 2021, p. 19). Seeking cultural recognition via normative conventions of civilization and Whiteness in neoclassical architecture could reinforce rather than budge the political center, capitulating to the dominant language of the status quo. Who owns architectural aesthetics? Can neoclassicism operate both as part of dominant narratives and as a hidden transcript? Further study is needed in this area, but the fungible operations of scale as the miniaturization process produces an ambiguous space with subtle access to cultural authority (J. Davy 2021). In the transnational world's fair and exhibitionary contexts that shaped these dioramas' display, constructions of race and nation were openly articulated and debated, a context makers leveraged. As Susanne Küchler suggests, an interpretive gap between the prototype and the miniature complicates meaning as the miniature reveals the "desire to model ideas of spatial and temporal relations immanent within the object of measure yet not denoted by it, and to communicate these to others" (Küchler 2019, p. 177). These miniature versions of neoclassical architecture might be read in deliberate dialogue with the transnational aesthetic as attempts to reframe neoclassicism in emancipatory contexts for African Americans.

Little discussed is that Fuller's project was collaborative. Photojournalists visited Warrick's Philadelphia studio in June 1907, making photographs of the artist and collaborators in progress as well as some of the completed figurines. The timeline all but necessitated shared labor; as Fuller observed to a critic that year, "It was done too hurriedly—think of it, almost one hundred and fifty figures to model in two months—and besides, the restrictions precluded really artistic work" (O'Donnell 1907, p. 1140). At least two illustrated articles detailed the emerging series and its contents. The *Boston Globe* printed a review and illustration of Fuller at work with other artists to build her designs (Figure 21). The articles note the "enormous task" of fabricating "150 figures" "figure by figure," and "an appropriate background" as well as "'properties' to make the groups look lifelike and natural," describing "Miss Warrick has been engaged on the groups for several months and they are gradually approaching completion. In the little studio . . . the sculptress has gathered around her a company of negro artists and here from early morning until late at night the work goes on" (Life Groups 1907; Life Story 1907). Three vignettes appear in the *Globe*. The lower depicts a different arrangement for the grouping in the diorama, *Improved Home Life* (Ater 2011, p. 63, Figure 32). The upper right image depicts a Black man with palette and brush facing a rendering of a copse of trees, perhaps the early background for the commencement scene, with the caption "Negro Artist Painting the Backgrounds This Man Studies at the Penn Academy of the Fine Arts." The scene to the left shows two women working with a figurine and is labeled "Miss Warrick Superintending the Dressing

of the Figures." Notably, the photograph seems to lighten the faces of the Warrick and the seated woman holding the figure, and in the view of the draft diorama "The Happy Home," pointing to the literal and discursive instabilities of the photographic medium's portrayal of Blackness (Sheehan 2018, pp. 2, 25, 29). This tonal shift raises the same conversations articulated by the shades of Blackness in the later dioramas. Another article in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* included these scenes and others in an overlapping photo montage (Figure 22). A portrait of Fuller at work on a figurine is in a roundel at center (Figure 23), and some of the figures are placed in an as-yet unpainted set. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* includes a surgery scene that does not appear in the final diorama series, and notes other scenes that were omitted, including Henry Ossawa Tanner, whose paintings were on view in the Negro Building, "whose work received such favorable attention. . .painting from the model" (Life Story 1907). These archives refer to the wider scope of the initiative and the sculptor's dialogue not only with Calloway and Du Bois on the content, but also with other makers marking out key episodes in African American history. Images of the 1907 dioramas are only known because they were used in a history textbook in 1908 (Jackson and Davis 1908; Ater 2011, p. 50), which expanded the representations to wide circulation as a material telling of history in which the built environment fulfilled a key role, not only as a backdrop, but also as place-making and dialogue with architectural styles like Romanesque revival and neoclassicism. This collaborative nature, access, and further circulation highlight, as with Hunster's series, shared investments in crafting transatlantic Black histories for wide exhibition-going publics.



LIFE GROUPS SHOW PROGRESS OF NEGRO

U S Government Will Exhibit at Jamestown the Life Story of the Race from the Landing of Slaves to the Present — The Work is Done by Miss Meta Warrick, a Young Negro Artist.

NEGRO ARTIST PAINTING THE BACKGROUNDS THIS MAN STUDIED AT THE PENN ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS

MISS WARRICK SUPERINTENDING THE PRESSING OF THE FIGURES

THE HAPPY HOME A NEGRO FAMILY AFTER THE EMANCIPATION

In a little studio over a disused stable in a narrow back alley of Philadelphia, the life story of the colored race, from the time when the first shipload of broken-spirited slaves landed at Jamestown, Va., in 1619, to the present day of educated prosperity, is being constructed figure by figure.

The story is to be told in a series of groupings, each of which will show the advance of the negro, step by step; the struggles of the chained slave for freedom, the emancipation, the almost despairing effort for a place in the white

Figure 21. Life Groups Show 1907. From Newspapers.com.



Figure 22. (Life Story 1907, p. 61). From Newspapers.com.

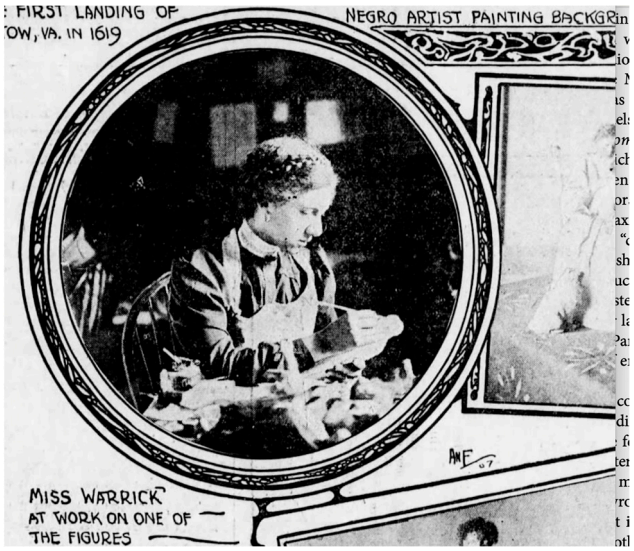


Figure 23. Miss Warrick At Work on One of the Figures, detail from Figure 22, (Life Story 1907). From Newspapers.com.

4. Charles C. Dawson and Community-Made Dioramas for the "American Negro Exhibition" 1940

Further expanding on the diorama as a transatlantic medium to encourage public discussions about Black history and life in the United States and beyond, African American artist Charles C. Dawson (1889–1981) designed many of the thirty-three dioramas at the center of the 1940 American Negro Exhibition in Chicago (Art of History 2020). The exhibition celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Civil War and Emancipation (*American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940; Negro Fair 1940; Helgeson 2012; Kasman 2021, p. 13; Wilson 2012, pp. 210–33). With plans led by James W. Washington, it attempted to revise the caricature and exclusion of African Americans at the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933–34 (Helgeson 2012, p. 131; Wilson 2012, p. 211). As historian Jeffrey Helgeson describes, the exhibition highlighted Chicago as a key place for African American life and exposed political tensions among Black leaders, resulting in a mix of narratives across the Fair: "Struggles for control of the planning and content of this celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Thirteen Amendment. . .created a state for diverse Black Chicago Renaissance figures and their views on African American history and the best paths for racial progress" (Helgeson 2012, p. 126).

Dawson contributed in several capacities to the American Negro Exhibition. The artist and designer is not named in the catalogue, though he appears to have produced or participated in the production of about twenty of the thirty-three models and developed the floor plan of the displays (Dawson n.d., pp. 6, 400; Brunswick Born 1948, p. 2; Kasman 2021, p. 14). Only the White manager of the group rendering this "history of the Negro illustrated in three-dimensions," Swedish designer Erik Lindgren, was named (*American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940, p. 90). Lindgren was hired because of his earlier contributions World's Fairs exhibits (Poston 1940a; Wilson 2012, p. 224; Dawson n.d., pp. 11, 402), but the *California Eagle* out of Los Angeles reported that Dawson and poet Arna Bontemps had provided "research material" to form the content of the diorama's episodes (Dioramas at Expo 1940; Wilson 2012, pp. 218–19, 223). Critic Harold Preece referred to Lindgren as a mere "showman" and figurehead (Preece 1940). On a resume in his archives, Dawson listed that he "planned and designed first sixteen of historical dioramas" (Dawson Papers, Reel 4191). In his autobiography, Dawson described his contributions to the Court of Honor, "consisting of 20 beautiful historical dioramas which I designed and furnished themes, depicting 7000 years of the contributions of so-called Negro people to world civilization." Working with Lindgren, Dawson recalled that he "co-supervised construction," starting with "small models of each" (Dawson n.d., p. 11).

From Brunswick, Georgia, Dawson studied at the Tuskegee Institute from 1905 to 1907. His father worked for a brewery in Brunswick, and Dawson began working as a cobbler (Dawson n.d., p. 139). In New York City, he was one of the first African American students in the Art Students League, working full time as an elevator man to finance art training. He noted mixed reception at the Art Students League, recalling that "after three months I was still unspoked to by white fellow students" (Dawson n.d., p. 153. See also Brunswick Born 1948, p. 1; Dawson n.d., pp. 138–39, 142–47, 167–68). He fought in France during World War I (Dawson n.d., pp. 260–95). He relocated to Chicago to train at the Art Institute while working at the Chicago Architectural Club (Dawson n.d., pp. 220–24, 229–30, 234–35) and became involved in art, commercial design, and illustration for the next few decades, while also working at the Illinois National Youth Administration (Schulman 2004, pp. 41, 45–46; Kasman 2021, pp. 14–16). Based on his autobiography, his career was frequently beset by inconsistent employment and opportunity (Dawson n.d., p. 148). Yet,

he worked as a graphic designer making illustrations and advertisements for cosmetics in the 1920s and 1930s and later curated the collection at the Tuskegee Institute, where he repeatedly requested resources to expand on the museum collections and displays, noting their importance to African American history and culture (Dawson Papers, Reel 4191).

Expanding the lineage of transatlantic diorama makers, Dawson was connected with Fuller. Not only was both their artwork on view at the 1940 exposition, but in the 1930s Dawson made a linoleum block portrait of Fuller to represent the letter "F" in his children's book project (Figure 24), the *ABC's of Great Negroes* (Dawson 1933). Dawson intended the book to highlight important Black figures in U.S. history offering an "array of distinguished of achievers cover[ing] all history" (Dawson n.d., p. 368). After viewing children's books in the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, he noted that there was "not a single book of beautiful illustrations or story on the Negro among these children's books" (Dawson n.d., p. 367). As he put it, he wanted the portraits "to be informative to all children but particularly for the inspiration of the Negro child" (Dawson n.d., p. 368). The inclusion of Fuller may have connected with his inclusion of her work in the exhibition he curated for the Art Institute of Chicago and Chicago Woman's Club in 1927 for the "Negro in Art Week" (Dawson n.d., p. 350; Meyerowitz 1997). With awareness of how often African American contributions were written out of the historical record, Dawson worked on this book for many years and struggled to find a publisher (Dawson n.d., pp. 369–70). It was finally published in 1933 (Dawson n.d., pp. 377–78). With a focus on Black history and portraits of notable individuals, the project aligns with narratives appearing and circulating in the diorama set Dawson later co-designed, reaffirming and expanding the visions of Black histories that Hunster, his students and Fuller had imagined to encompass even longer histories of the African diaspora.



Figure 24. Charles C. Dawson, *Page for F, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller*, 1932, in (Dawson 1933), linoleum print, scanned from microfiche, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

Extensive notes and drafts in Dawson's archives developing a booklet show his attempts to produce an African American art history tracing back to Edmonia Lewis,

Edward M. Bannister, Robert Duncanson, William Harper, Tanner, and Fuller in dialogue with writings of Alain Locke (Dawson Papers, Reel 4192). Dawson observes how "the Negro's career in the fine arts is little known either to the general or the racial public." Noting the role of enslavement in disrupting transmission of "craft arts and ancestral skills" as well as "song and dance" for African Americans, he writes that "in spite of the handicap of slavery and prejudice in America, tho small in number except in the decorative crafts, research has disclosed that the Negro has followed along with American art developments from the beginning" (Dawson Papers, Reel 4192). Dedicating a paragraph to Fuller, Dawson noted her marriage and studio location, "wife of Solomon O. Fuller of S. Framingham, Mass." He highlighted her sculpture, *The Wretched* (1902; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art) as "her masterpiece" and listed the "executed symbolic groups on the Negro for the Jamestown Tercentennial" (Dawson Papers, Reel 4192). Dawson's comment affirms his awareness of these key prototypes for his diorama project. Suggesting an awareness of the American Negro Exhibition in Chicago as part of a lineage of African American artists leveraging world's fair spaces, he also noted the importance of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition for both Bannister and Lewis's careers (Dawson Papers, Reel 4192; (Orcutt 2017, pp. 74–75, 200–2). The importance of the diorama project for Dawson's career and legacy is suggested by the artist's discussing it in the opening pages of his autobiography as well as in detail later (Dawson n.d., pp. 5–17).

The collection of dioramas (Figure 25) was installed at the "conceptual core" of the exposition (Wilson 2012, p. 216); Dawson described it as "unquestioningly the heart of the American Negro Exposition as an intrinsic work of art and beauty—as well as the most significant history" (Dawson n.d., p. 402). Wilson describes the exhibition design as a "spare Egyptian-influence art deco style" (Wilson 2012, p. 222). It also aligns with the stripped neoclassicism that informed government architecture in the United States and in Germany during this period. Many of the topics addressed by Hunster and Fuller remain, but this project takes an even broader scope, encompassing examples from the ancient world as well as modern subjects and stories. Wilson explains, "This visual essay in black history provided an entrée into historical events, figures, and circumstances of black advancement since the age of the pharaohs" (Wilson 2012, p. 222). The models are 5 feet wide, 4 feet tall and 3 feet deep and formed the backbone of the exhibition that flanked them in the main hall at the center on the floor plan (Figures 25–27).[5] The figures are about 4–6 inches tall. Fashioned of wood, plaster, and paint, the models are stridently three-dimensional with fuller backgrounds and settings than the earlier two series. While they were inset into rectangular viewing boxes, their backs were concave canvases, which heightened a foreshortened effect. They were "mounted in tall, beautiful columns and illuminated by specially designed lights" (Dioramas at Expo 1940); lit from above as in the previous two diorama series (Kasman 2021, p. 30). The dioramas were actively commented upon in the press and were often reproduced (Hayes 1940; Poston 1940a, 1940b; Williamson 1940).

As with the earlier dioramas, architecture operated metaphorically at this exhibition. Reviewer Harold Preece observed "the poetic justice" invoked by the re-use of bricks in the Exposition hall from Old Libby Prison, which housed "captured fighters against slavery," in Richmond, Virginia during the Civil War and reopened as a prison museum in Chicago in the late nineteenth century (Preece 1940; Old Libby Prison 1889). Taking control of the materials of oppression and refiguring them in narratives of self-determination marks a powerful statement through the built environment.

The built environment within the dioramas rendered histories of change and expressed the continuity of Black societal contributions (Preece 1940). Some of the narratives present ancient histories, such as the construction of the temples at Karnak in Egypt visible in a photograph of Claude Barnett, president of the Associated Negro Press who worked

with the planning board for the American Negro Exposition, showing the diorama to Robert Bishop, a member of Governor Henry Horner's staff (reproduced in Kasman 2021, Figure 2, p. 11; on Barnett, see, Helgeson 2012, p. 131; Wilson 2012, pp. 212–15).[6] The scene makes longstanding historical connections between Blackness and enslaved labor. The connection also links to the African diaspora with a note in the catalogue about "a monument to the genius of forgotten artisans and builders who created the glory that once was Africa" (*American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940, p. 10). The *California Eagle* concurred that it showed the efforts of "black artisans and craftsmen" to produce a site "ranked among the world's greatest wonders" (Dioramas at Expo 1940). This addition also revises histories of the built environment's emphasis on Greco-Roman traditions to bring to the foreground Egyptian civilization as part of African and African American origins.

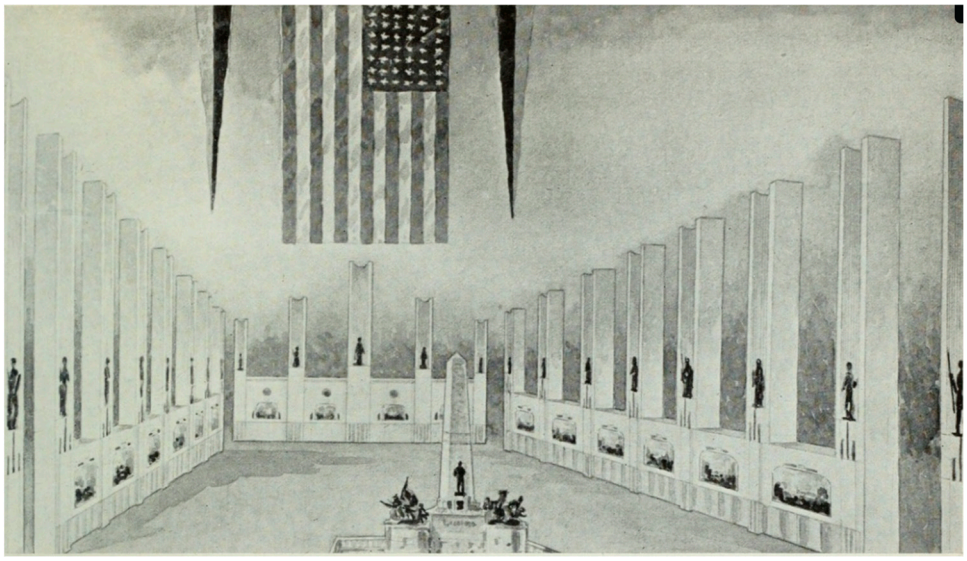


Figure 25. "The Court of Dioramas," From *American Negro Exposition Official Program and Guide Book, 1863–1940*, Chicago Coliseum, 4 July–2 September 1940 (Chicago: American Negro Exposition Program Committee, 1940), p. 9.

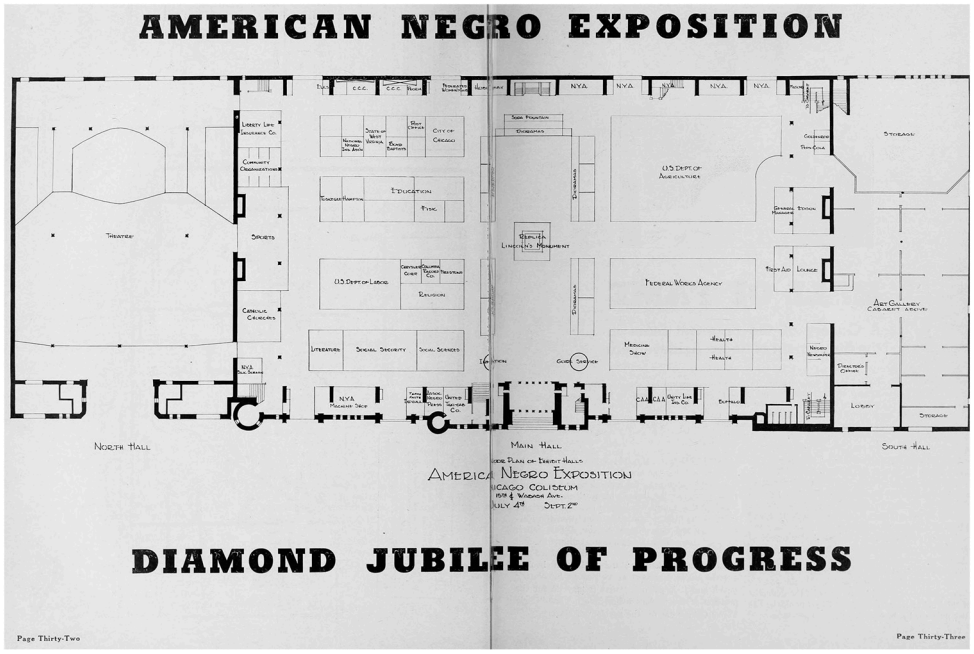


Figure 26. *Cont.*

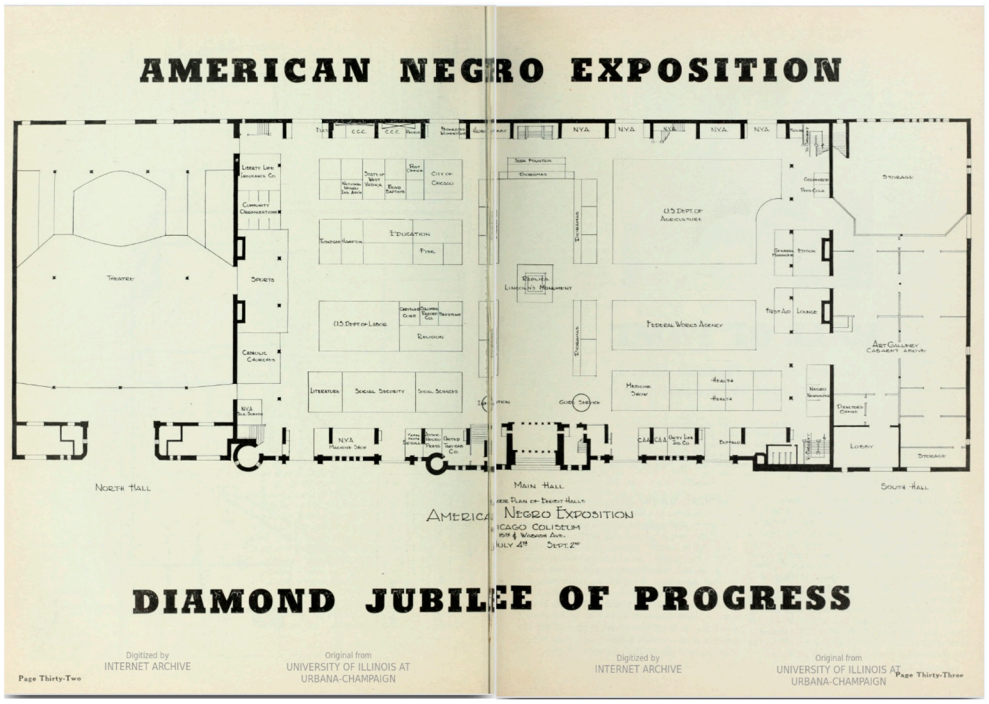


Figure 26. "Floor Plan of Exhibit Halls," American Negro Exposition, 1940. From *American Negro Exposition Official Program and Guide Book, 1863–1940*, Chicago Coliseum, 4 July–2 September 1940 (Chicago: American Negro Exposition Program Committee, 1940), pp. 32–33.



Figure 27. View of General Exhibits at Exposition, in *Program and guidebook*, America Negro Exposition-Chicago, 1940, Vertical Files Collection, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

Other dioramas render the slave trade on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as a tumultuous passage. As with the earlier series designed by Hunster and Fuller, generic and archetypal architectural forms preside. Dawson takes up the same motif as Fuller in a diorama of the *First Slaves in Virginia* (Figure 28; see Figure 10). White traders are in the foreground, grasping incoming enslaved people forcibly by neck and head. Compositionally,

Dawson's design echoes Fuller's with the building at right, transforming her painted ship at left into a model ship at left, and diagonal trajectory of enslaved people moving from left to right and background to foreground. A foreshortened effect of scale of enslaved people in chains being paraded from the boat highlights multitudes. The ship wharf buildings at both sides define the port scene parallelled across many locations along the coasts of North America, marking the architecture as archetype. However, there is some suggestion that the blue haint color of the building may have resonated with some African religions (Kasman 2021, pp. 37–38).



Figure 28. Charles Dawson and Collaborators, *Slave Trade in Africa*. 1940, diorama, Legacy Museum at Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Alabama, photograph by Carole Bandy Carson.

Building on a strategy of specificity that characterized some of Hunster's and Fuller's dioramas, many of the dioramas are sited in the United States, taking place in identifiable locations and figuring key moments in African American contributions to U.S. society and history. For instance, the first individual killed in the Revolutionary War, Crispus Attucks (c. 1723–1770), who was Afro Indigenous, is placed in front of a replica of the Old State House in Boston viewed from the southwest (Kachun 2017, pp. 7–28). Killed on March 5, 1770, the shooting of Attucks centers his martyrdom (Figure 29) by silhouetting his form against the snow and the backdrop of the Old State House (Figure 30; see also Kasman 2021, p. 21).

Regarding this diorama's subject, the *California Eagle* quoted from John Adams: "The English-speaking world will never forget the noble daring, the excusable rashness of Attucks in the holy cause of liberty" (Dioramas at Expo 1940). Yet, outside of African American circles in the interwar period, Attucks was understudied (Kachun 2017, pp. 96–119). Civil rights activist Harold Preece noted in New York's *Daily World* how often "the name of Crispus Attucks has been omitted from the school histories" (Preece 1940), a story spotlit into prominence by the diorama's re-emplacement of the episode and concurrent writings by African American authors of the period. In his autobiography, Dawson described inadvertently discovering Attucks's history during a trip to Boston after visiting Augustus Saint-Gaudens's Robert Gould Shaw Memorial. He observed, "Most incongruously, my textbooks had 'short changed' me, so had others by not telling me, that, also there in the Commons, there was a statute to Commemorate the 'First American Martyr, the first American to give his life for his country, for the independence of his country, Negro

'Crispus Attucks,' (Dawson n.d., p. 200). He noted his on-the-ground access enacted "a dramatization of the fact of Crispus Attucks" (Dawson n.d., p. 201).



Figure 29. Charles Dawson and Collaborators, *Crispus Attucks, First Martyr*. 1940, diorama, Legacy Museum at Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Alabama, photograph by Carole Bandy Carson.



Figure 30. Detail of Figure 29. Photograph by the author.

Pointing to the importance of place and American history, Dawson takes care to locate the scene at the specific Old Massachusetts State House in Boston (Figure 31), which is also the site of the first meeting house in Boston. Taking up a key site in the Revolutionary War, Dawson visualizes a synergized moment enmeshing African American and U.S. histories. Echoing the body's demise, the radical foreshortening of the building draws attention to this spatial presence and the ways in which martyrdom shapes the body and the built politic.

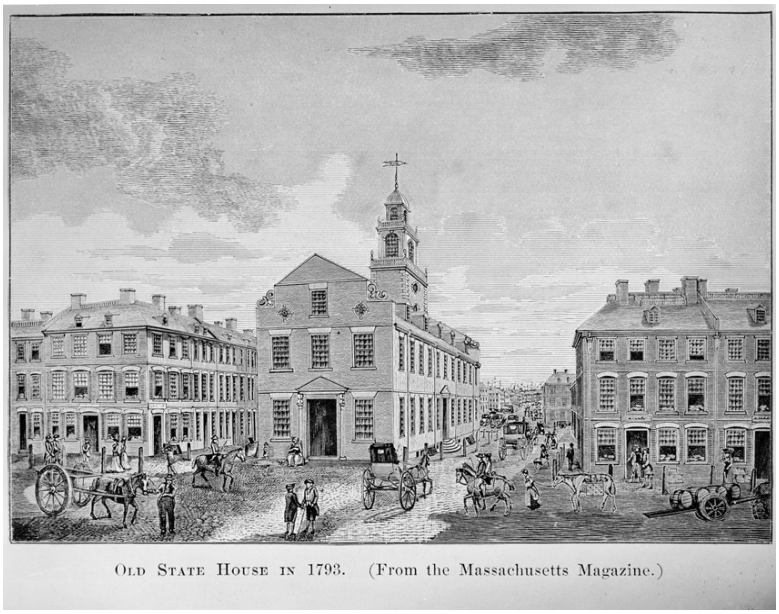


Figure 31. Samuel Hill, *Old State House in 1793*, in *Massachusetts Magazine*, July 1793, engraving, Historic New England, PC001.02.01.USMA.0340.7520.001, https://www.historicnewengland.org/explore/collections-access/gusn/195198, accessed on 19 August 2025.

Dawson's rendering of the site intriguingly introduces anachronism in its inclusion of surrounding buildings added later in the nineteenth century, as depicted in a photograph from 1904 by Nathaniel L. Stebbins (Figure 32), rather than the buildings that flanked the State House in the period, as seen in Samuel Hill's engraving. The building at far left, which seems to form the round arches on the windows in the diorama, the Second Brazer Building (Figure 33), was designed by Cass Gilbert and opened in 1897 (The Second Brazer Building: Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report 1985). Heightened by the addition of a clock at the top of the façade, this anachronism productively suggests the legacy of Attucks's sacrifice in the future. It also invites the possibility that Dawson introduces not only this historical event into the mainstream, but that he highlights the site as he experienced it during his visit when he first discovered the historical marker (Dawson n.d., p. 200). This placemaking introduces a transhistorical component and expands the power of place invoked by the models. The specificity of emplacement, coupled with an expansive temporality, combats historical erasure.

Dawson's dioramas answer the erasure of African Americans' contributions to humanity and to the U.S. history. Dawson's autobiography suggests how he imagined himself embodying figures in each key episodes of African American history. These ideas may have shaped his perception of his role in designing the dioramas as well as the importance of place-making. He recalled that as he viewed the Statue of Liberty from the boat after fighting in the first World War, he meditated on contributions of African Americans to the United States and their omission from the record. "AND, finally here at home now, I was Crispus Attucks the First American Martyr for the independence of this nation. I was Peter Salem, the hero of Bunker Hill; I crossed the Delaware with Washington, I was with Jackson at New Orleans in strong and effective numbers. I was three hundred thousand times strong and saved the Union, as Lincoln said a number of times. I was Booker T. Washington, one of the world's greatest educators. In the sciences, I was George Washington Carver and Percy Julian. . . but home denies or avoids remembering these. . . the great statue and what it symbolizes still has too much back turned to me" (Dawson n.d., p. 297). He concluded with a tone shared by many contemporary African American soldiers, "I was returning from one war to reenter that I had left" (Dawson n.d., p. 297; Williams 2010). Dawson's commentary

explains his investments in making visible to the public the legacy of African history and cultural contributions. These suggestively propose how he may have approached the creative realm of the miniature and the diorama to inlay multiple experiences in place and highlight the meaning of these episodic histories in present lived experience. In other words, access to place in his travels and in his place-making within the dioramas enabled him to experience a simulacrum embodying African American contributions to American history, culture, and life.



Figure 32. Nathaniel L. Stebbins, *Old State House, State and Devonshire Streets, Boston, Mass., 4 May 1904*, photographic print, 1904, Historic New England, Nathaniel L. Stebbins photographic collection, PC047.02.6090.15281.



Figure 33. Cass Gilbert, *Second Brazer Building*, 1897, Boston, image from the Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report, 1985, p. 7.

Specific architectural models also draw attention to African American education, especially in the last two models in the set; as with the earlier diorama series, Dawson's contributions conclude with celebrations of education. While they are not extant, these included renderings of two specific schools in Warm Springs, Georgia: the Georgia Negro School, and its replacement in the late 1930s, the Eleanor Roosevelt School (Figure 34). The catalogue notes that the latter "is the last school to be built through the aid of the Julius Rosenwald fund" (*American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940, p. 12; Feiler 2021; S. L. Smith 1950), which had also lent money for the Exposition itself (Helgeson 2012, p. 131). As Hunster brought to the foreground the M Street School (Figure 6) and Fuller Howard University (Figure 18), the emplacement of African American education at primary, secondary, and college levels supports claims about present and future of Black identities in the United States.

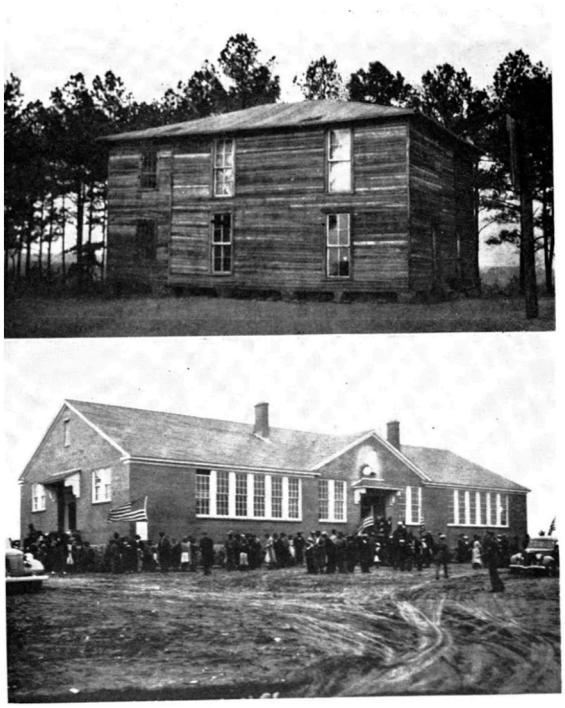


Figure 34. Georgia Negro School and Eleanor Roosevelt School, in S. L. Smith, *Builders of goodwill: The story of the State agents of Negro education in the South, 1910 to 1950*. Nashville: Tennessee Book Company, 1950, p. 181.

Model 21, *Construction of the First White House* (Figure 35) also used specific architecture to situate and position Black leadership and societal contributions. The scene depicts Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806), a free Black engineer and astronomer from Maryland who worked on the land survey preparing for the capitol city in Washington DC (Rusert 2017, pp. 35–50; Swartz 2013; Fraser 2021, pp. 28–47). The figure stands in front of a model of the original White House designed by James Hoban, which was constructed initially in between 1791 and 1799 and then rebuilt after the War of 1812 (Dioramas at Expo 1940; Ryan and Guinness 1980, pp. 55–65), both times using a neoclassical portico. Banneker famously wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1791 to protest the president's insistent racist hierarchies, pushing him to back up his statement that "all men are created equal" (Williams and Woodson 2024, p. 413). Banneker implored:

> we are a race of Beings who have long laboured under the abuse and censure of the world, that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contempt, and that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and Scarcely

> capable of mental endowments. . .. I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions which so generally prevails with respect to us, and that your Sentiments are concurrent with mine, which are that one universal Father hath given being to us all, and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also without partiality afforded us all the same sensations, and endued us all with the same faculties. (Williams and Woodson 2024, p. 394)

Banneker's anti-racist assertions become embedded in Dawson's diorama through the central focus on this figure and the building he helped to engineer. Dawson's design extends the continued recirculation of Banneker's words in African American communities through re-publication in the nineteenth century, from the *Colored American* to writings by William Wells Brown into visual form (Rusert 2017, pp. 35, 40). As Gordon Fraser describes it, Banneker and his colleagues were "agents of the state" with the authority in their work to "re-order space" (Fraser 2021, p. 31); the diorama points to this role with its avid discussion, empirical practice underway, and gesticulation among the figures. The representation connotes how Banneker, as Ellen E. Swartz argues of him, connected "his African continental and diasporan contexts, showing not only the African source of his scientific genius but his agency and advocacy for human freedom in the colonial period" (Swartz 2013, p. 31). Work-in-progress is a strong metaphor; the scaffolding on the edges of the White House and the Black labor rendered at right highlight construction and progress, a theme echoing Fuller's two models that render construction of homes (Figures 11 and 12). Banneker stands out in dress and comportment from depictions of Black laborers struggling with building materials at right, perhaps modeling a pathway from enslavement or showing how African American physical and mental labor alike informed the nation's founding and construction of the U.S. state. Citing this scene in the Early Republic of the nation's capital affirms the presence and involvement not only of African Americans in U.S. history but also politics. As in other dioramas, the figure's relationship with the neoclassical structure is layered; Banneker both stands before the structure as if the foundation for it, and it also towers over him; the two toggle for visual authority. This architectural stage-set acts as more than a backdrop, but frames and makes material a poignant political intervention, making presence and societal participation, especially given Banneker's critique of Jefferson, fellow proponent of neoclassical aesthetics (Wilson 2020).

Perhaps recognizing the synecdoche, and as with the earlier diorama projects, these dioramas were built through collective effort. With a four-month lead time for the massive undertaking (Kasman 2021, p. 16), commissioning labor and community involvement was crucial. Newspapers reported that as many as seventy people worked on the 1940 dioramas, highlighting that collaboration through photography (Dioramas at Expo 1940; Prepare Negro Exposition 1940). A discussion of musician Duke Ellington's puzzlement at the dioramas mentioned that he "visited studios where 70 artists are finishing up 24 murals and 20 dioramas to be used by the Exposition (Figure 36; Duke Ellington 1940). Ellington compares a miniature model with the final model, perhaps of dioramas 12, *Drawing Water for Irrigation*. Another photograph shows a miniature model and its final version, noting Joseph C. Pettiford as the artist who is translating the mural in scale, depicting jockey Isaac Murphy (Figure 37, Exploits of Isaac 1940). The *Chicago Tribune* also photographed women, identified as Dorothy Collins, Allene Walls, and Bernice Harris, working on forming the trees for the dioramas (Figure 38; Prepare Negro Exposition 1940). A set of photographs printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on the same day identified additional makers, Robert Edward Jones (probably Robert Edmond Lee Jones, b. 1913), Elsmer Hathaway (perhaps son of artist Isaac Scott Hathaway, 1772–1967 who died in 1941), Bernice Harris again, and Robert

Weaver at work on the ship for the *First Slaves in Virginia* (Figure 39; on Weaver, see Kasman 2021, pp. 22, 24, 33, 34, 36). Though it has not been easy to identify these individuals, these photographs highlight the participatory nature of diorama-building for the exposition, and collaboration on concepts and production spiraling out from Dawson's framework. This shared labor underlines how the dioramas design shared narratives and collective efforts to build an African American culture. This community participation extended the construction of transatlantic African American history inter-socially and intergenerationally, literally shaping the formation of history and passing it on through exhibition.

The collaborative American Negro Exposition dioramas mark a further step in the transatlantic history of African American history telling through the medium. Larger in number, more global in scope, and leaning into carefully curated representations of prototypes from the built environment, added a selective sense of specificity, drawing viewers into the time and space of the scene in the scenarios where African American individuals challenged the structural societal limitations imposed upon them. The locations produced literal ties between African American history, cultural authority, and civic spaces. More archetypal spaces and sites continued to stand in for wider histories of oppression that preceded the modern world, while the Old State House in Boston and the White House articulated clear spaces for embedding African American historical contributions in place and memory. In this way, the makers created a global, transhistorical, and transtemporal structure of African American history.



Figure 35. Charles Dawson and Collaborators, *Construction of the First White House*. 1940, diorama, Legacy Museum at Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Alabama, photograph by Carole Bandy Carson.

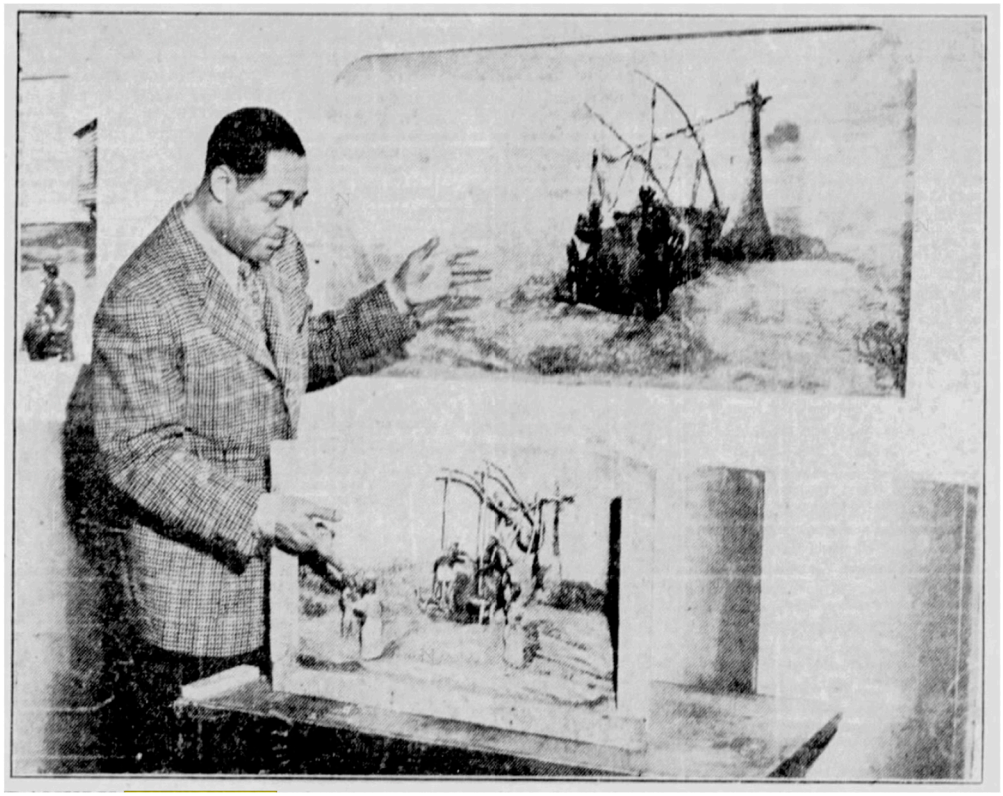


Figure 36. "Duke Ellington is Puzzled by Dioramas," in (Duke Ellington 1940). Newspapers.com.

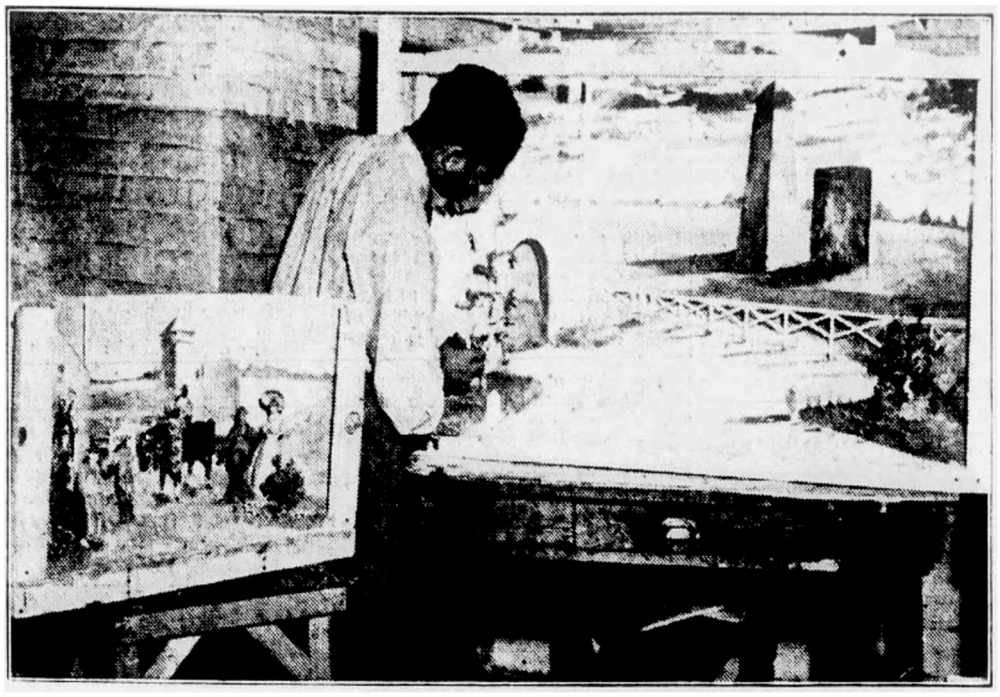


Figure 37. (Exploits of Isaac 1940). From Newspapers.com.



Figure 38. (Prepare Negro Exposition 1940). From Newspapers.com.



Negro Exposition to Depict Development of Race

A replica of the Lincoln monument in Springfield will have a prominent place in the Coliseum for the opening of the first American Negro exposition Thursday noon. Scattered thruout the first floor and balconies will be dioramas, murals, portraits, and exhibits illustrating Negro progress since emancipation. Robert Edward Jones, sculptor, is making the figures for the replica, while Truman K. Gibson, executive director of the exposition, looks on.

Elsmer Hathaway, 6352 Calumet avenue, is one of the 70 Negro workers completing 24 dioramas for the first Negro world's fair in the Coliseum which will continue thru Sept. 2. He is shown carving wooden figures for a diorama which will be entitled "In the City of Destruction." More than 50 dioramas, murals, portraits, and statues, now being rapidly rushed to completion by the corps of artists, will constitute Illinois' exhibit at the exposition.

Small scale figures made of baked clay or carved from wood are being hand painted these days in preparation for the Negro exposition. The figures will be used in dioramas telling the histoy of the Negro race. Miss Bernice Harris is painting a couple that will be used in the diorama called "In the City of Destruction."

Negro World's Fair to Open on Thursday

The first Negro World's Fair will be launched with a ceremony at 2 o'clock Thursday afternoon, two hours after the doors of the Coliseum have been thrown open for the exposition. Designed as a celebration of 75 years of Negro progress since emancipation, the exhibition will run until Sept. 2.

The opening ceremony will combine the theme of the race's national jubilee with the spirit of Independence day. Mayor Kelly, head of the city commission which coöperated in staging the event, and representatives of the federal commission appointed by President Roosevelt, will be present. Gov. Horner, chairman of the state commission for the exposition, will send a representative. Special music has been arranged to accompany the opening program.

The show will consist mainly of educational layouts and booths, plus murals, dioramas, and other exhibits telling the history of the Negro race from the earliest records to 1940, with particular emphasis on the part played in building the United States and Chicago.

Work of Many Artists.

They represent the combined work of more than 70 artists under the supervision of Erik Lindgren, artist and authority on dioramas, and William Edouard Scott, internationally

Robert Weaver, 1247 Victoria street, is shown putting the finishing touches on the wooden model of a sailing ship which will appear in the diorama, "First Slaves in Virginia." [TRIBUNE Photos.]

D. A. R. CHAPTER

CAMP HOUGHTELING

Figure 39. (Negro Exposition 1940). From Newspapers.com.

5. Conclusions

In the period of Hunster's, Fuller's, and Dawson's diorama projects from 1899 to 1940, continued segregation, the failures of Reconstruction to produce a society of equals, and lack

of access to land ownership and social mobility propelled the currency of these critical and aspirational environments. As art historian Anna Arabindan Kesson writes, "to be a Black American after emancipation was this: to be Black was to be under continual assessment. To be Black was to continually (re)produce and prove your value and your worth to society and the nation, to become citizens" (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, p. 157). Echoing comments about the Exhibit of American Negroes in Paris responding to "the colored man. . . on trial before the civilized world" (Negro Exhibit at Paris 1900b, p. 8), in preparing the 1940 exhibition, Black Chicagoan Claude Barnett wrote to organizer Washington, "You are on trial in this matter, and so is the whole race" (Green 2007, p. 20). Notions of a racialized societal test and attempts to overcome social limitations pervade the dioramas.

The dioramas operate through James C. Scott's framing of dominant narratives and hidden transcripts as resistance to domination (Scott 1990); aspects of both operate in these diorama spaces. In some ways, the political interventions of these diorama projects are limited by a state of constant "visual scrutiny" (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, p. 157) which compels artists to take up the narrative of "progress" that frames these three series. Accepted styles of public architecture—especially Romanesque revival and Neoclassicism—shape the implications of the buildings included in the dioramas. There are limits on what could be overtly said in these federally funded exhibition projects. Sexual violence targeting African Americans is documented history but not rendered for these public venues. New York reviewer of the 1940s series Preece complained that there were no dioramas "commemorating the slave rebellions," addressing "abolition," or "sharecropper struggle" and unionization in the previous decade (Preece 1940). Other lacunae for Preece include lynching and peonage (Preece 1940). These critiques suggest the complex entwinement of narratives built by the Chicago Exposition, which comprised a range of progressive and radical agendas (Helgeson 2012, pp. 129, 130). Preece's comments also point to limitations on what could be uttered in public exhibition spaces about histories of oppression.

The ephemerality of the objects may also limit their political statements. The fragility of dioramas rendered both Hunster's and Dawson's projects damaged in transit, and Fuller's did not survive. Only half of the 1940s set mark the only remaining material examples, and many of these remain in storage. Likewise, the diminutive scale of the buildings and figures structured to look down upon them and visually possess them through perception (Grigsby 2012, p. 157) may seem to reduce the political interpolations of the dioramas. Notably, in Hunster's and Dawson's cases, being lower to the ground brought them closer to children's eye level (Kasman 2021, p. 10). By installation, except for Hunster's series in Buffalo, the dioramas were all materially boxed in. Some of the photographs of Fuller's dioramas show a claustrophobic enclosed ceiling, and the open tops now visible on Dawson's dioramas would not have been visible to contemporary viewers, as they were slotted into place like an aquarium lit from above.

The dioramas signal the trajectories and limitations of their designers' careers; Hunster to a successful teaching and exhibiting career, and building his own home in Ardwick, Maryland in Prince Georges County in the early 1920s; Fuller's propelled career after 1907 enabled her to build a studio in the attic of her Framingham, Massachusetts home, memorialized by Framingham State University's Danforth Art Museum and by a digital humanities project by Schneider and students (Schneider et al. 2024; Passannante 2024). Though shifting labor to motherhood reduced art-making opportunities later in her life, she was active in theater and lighting design, building on her diorama series in life size. After the exhibition, Dawson moved back to Tuskegee, where from 1944 to 1945, he was curator of the Museum of Negro Art and Culture at Tuskegee University (Dawson Papers, Reel 4191; letters with F.D. Patterson). He and Barnett, who both attended Tuskegee Institute, shipped about twenty of the models after the end of the exposition (Kasman 2021, p. 26). Damaged

in transit, Dawson worked to repair and re-install them (Dawson n.d., pp. 431–32), but funds ran out to support these initiatives after one year. Dawson left Tuskegee, moving to relative obscurity in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Some of the dioramas were recently conserved by faculty and students from the Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library (Kasman 2021; Art of History 2020), and a Matterport reproduces the ones presently on view in the Legacy Museum.[7]

While circumscribed, the makers made calculated choices of generic or specific architectural prototypes across the dioramas to shape the larger arguments and interventions of the diorama series, raising possibilities to produce a hidden transcript. Through these aesthetic and iconographic choices, building types render a more nebulous past, a non-space that universalizes that past into archetype and memory, while these specific prototypes aspire to a grounded and episodic present, elevate African American contributions to U.S. society, and aspire for a springboard into futurity. Building types abound in the scenes of oppression: the early cabins of Hunster's series, even the white schoolhouse, and in Fuller's dioramas, buildings are mostly types—the cabin, and the plantation house, for example. Likewise, Dawson includes types of buildings in rendering the arrival of enslaved people in Virginia or in a scene of Reconstruction based on Eastman Johnson's 1857 painting *Negro Life in the South* (N-Y Historical Society). Countering the archetypes, all three of the diorama series engage with specific buildings, from the M Street School to the Carnegie Library at Howard University, and from the AME Church in Philadelphia to the Old Massachusetts State House to the White House, to emplace progress and mobilities, embedding Black histories and achievements in place and time. The foil between general and specific built environments in this transatlantic conversation became a powerful tool to define spaces of opportunity while simultaneously critiquing racist structures by signaling how pervasive they were. Such acts of localizing the placemaking of progress and interruptions to historical discourse operate through specificity. Ongoing work to mark sites of slavery history with specific, localized monuments, as René Ater is documenting, pushes for the same kind of geographic specificity and attention to local contexts as constellated points with larger systems (Ater 2025).

The tremendous mobility of the dioramas and the politically potent potential of the miniature render the architecture and its meanings fluid. Hunster's models traveled from Washington DC, to Paris, to Buffalo, New York, then back again. Fuller's models, made in Philadelphia after memories from Paris, were then transported to Jamestown, Virginia, and flattened into book form in the only volume that holds known photographs of these dioramas. Yet that book had and continues to have wide circulation (Jackson and Davis 1908). Likewise, Dawson's models not only depict but also enact the African diaspora in their representations as they move from Chicago to Tuskegee, are toured in the South in the year after the exhibition, and back to Tuskegee, where they are again in the process of being restored. As the dioramas render and then mobilize specific architectural sites, they produce a metaphorically unbounded and unfixed space that challenges stereotyping or bounding identities for African Americans (Burns 2022). Using the built environment and the mobile miniature, the dioramas use place to establish African American history in many places. Notably, all three of these series highlight buildings in the nation's capital, linking the series with spaces of diplomacy, negotiation, and lobbying for both literal and metaphorical recognition. By representing buildings made with Romanesque revival and with neoclassicism, the models circumvent the politics of exclusion that linked these sites with dominant culture, producing hidden transcripts.

This story continues. Digital humanities projects and ongoing scholarship expand the mobility of these representations and their stories. These media draw us into the episodes and re-enact, to a degree, the models' ambitions in their day, inviting us to consider racism, equality, and the role of the built environment in marking history as it

unfolds. Fuller may or may not have envisaged that the stage of Howard University's future Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall (1935) would serve as the backdrop for a Black and Asian American presidential candidate's concession speech after the 2024 election. Dawson may or may not have anticipated that an African American president would stand in Banneker's footsteps at the White House. Yet by showing these spaces and institutions of education and politics as accessible, these representations play a role in making those outcomes possible.

In a photograph printed in the newspaper of composer Florence B. Price and musical director Mrs. Tompkins at the edge of the *Crispus Attucks, First Martyr* at the American Negro Exposition (Figure 29), the pair flank the edges of the diorama (Figure 40). Their placement heightens the effect of spatial recession produced by the buildings at left and right of the Old Massachusetts State House. The extant model enables us to observe how the architectural renderings visually transport the viewer in time and space (Figure 41). In part, the scale recession produces this dramatic effect, but it is enhanced by a sense of warping in the curvature of the back of the diorama and the fungible transition from plaster to canvas. This almost cinematic effect draws the viewer in and reminds them of the degree to which the diorama invites them to quite literally change their perspective. This compositional space parallels how the miniature scale of models invites viewers to tunnel into the space and alter their point of view (Foxhall 2015, p. 3). Dawson himself spoke to the power of producing perspective with the dioramas, writing, "the dioramas were marvels of perspective creating illusions of great depth at a few feet distance" (Dawson n.d., p. 431). Dawson's writings and dioramas make clear that he repeatedly considered the relationship between the part and the whole, individual contributions and the wider scope of history, a dialectic between macro and micro that plays out in the very composition of the dioramas. The pervasive use of architectural copies and scenes of construction not only serves to define these places for all viewers but also points towards specific paths for African American liberation and authoritative grounding in place and space. Capitalizing on the persuasive space of international exhibitions in a transatlantic conversation, these artists designed the dioramas to picture histories of Black oppression, but more pointedly, contestation, liberation, and autonomy.

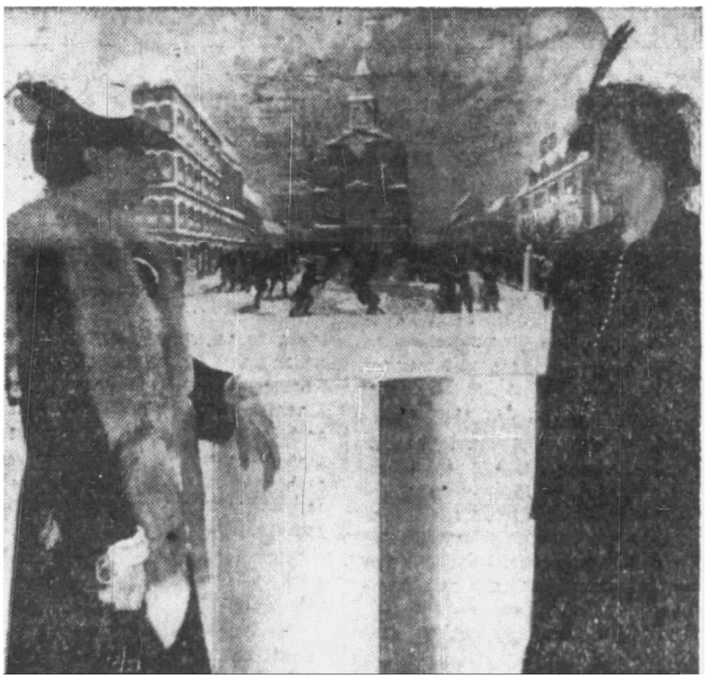


Figure 40. Viewing Boston Massacre, in (Preece 1940). From Newspapers.com.



Figure 41. Detail of Figure 30. Photograph by the Author.

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Notes

1 Following Kristen Mack and John Palfry, I capitalize White as well as Black in this text, except as used in published sources. See Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity, 20 August 2020, accessed on 15 January 2025, https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity.

2 "Judged By Merit," https://www.grantcottage.org/blog/2021/2/27/judged-by-merit/. Accessed on 13 July 2025.

3 Sandra L. Tatman, "Hazlehurst & Huckel (fl. 1881–1900)," in The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, "Philadelphia Architects and Buildings," accessed on 14 September 2025, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22158.

4 Thanks to Sonja Woods for identifying this structure.

5 Five of the dioramas were related to E. Franklin Frazier's book *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) (Wilson 2012, pp. 226–27; *American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940, p. 12). Without

images, I do not discuss these tableaux here. Many other dioramas also warrant further discussion, such as the *Negro Life in the South* adaptation of Eastman Johnson's painting of the same title (New-York Historical Society), reproduced in (*American Negro Exposition, 1853–1940: Chicago Coliseum—July 4 to Sept. 2: Official Program and Guide Book* 1940, p. 12); the agricultural college in Port au Prince, Haiti; Matthew Hensen's exploration of the Arctic Pole; and African American martyrdom in World War I. All are extant at the Legacy Museum at Tuskegee University.

[6] Claude Barnett, leading member of the American Negro Exposition board of trustees (right), and Robert Bishop of Governor Henry Horner's staff (left), beside diorama depicting African builders at the ancient temple of Karnak in Egypt, on display at the American Negro Exposition, Chicago Coliseum, 7 July 1940. Reproduction of this image required a biannually renewed license, so I link to it here: https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/robert-bishop-of-governor-henry-horners-staff-and-claude-news-photo/517318314?adppopup=true, accessed on 1 September 2025.

[7] The Matterport is no longer accessible. Photographs of the installation by Theo M. Moore III are visible in "A Brief Introduction to the Legacy Museum: The Legacy Museum Dioramas Exhibit," https://tuskegee.libguides.com/c.php?g=865846&p=6654655, accessed on 1 October 2025.

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