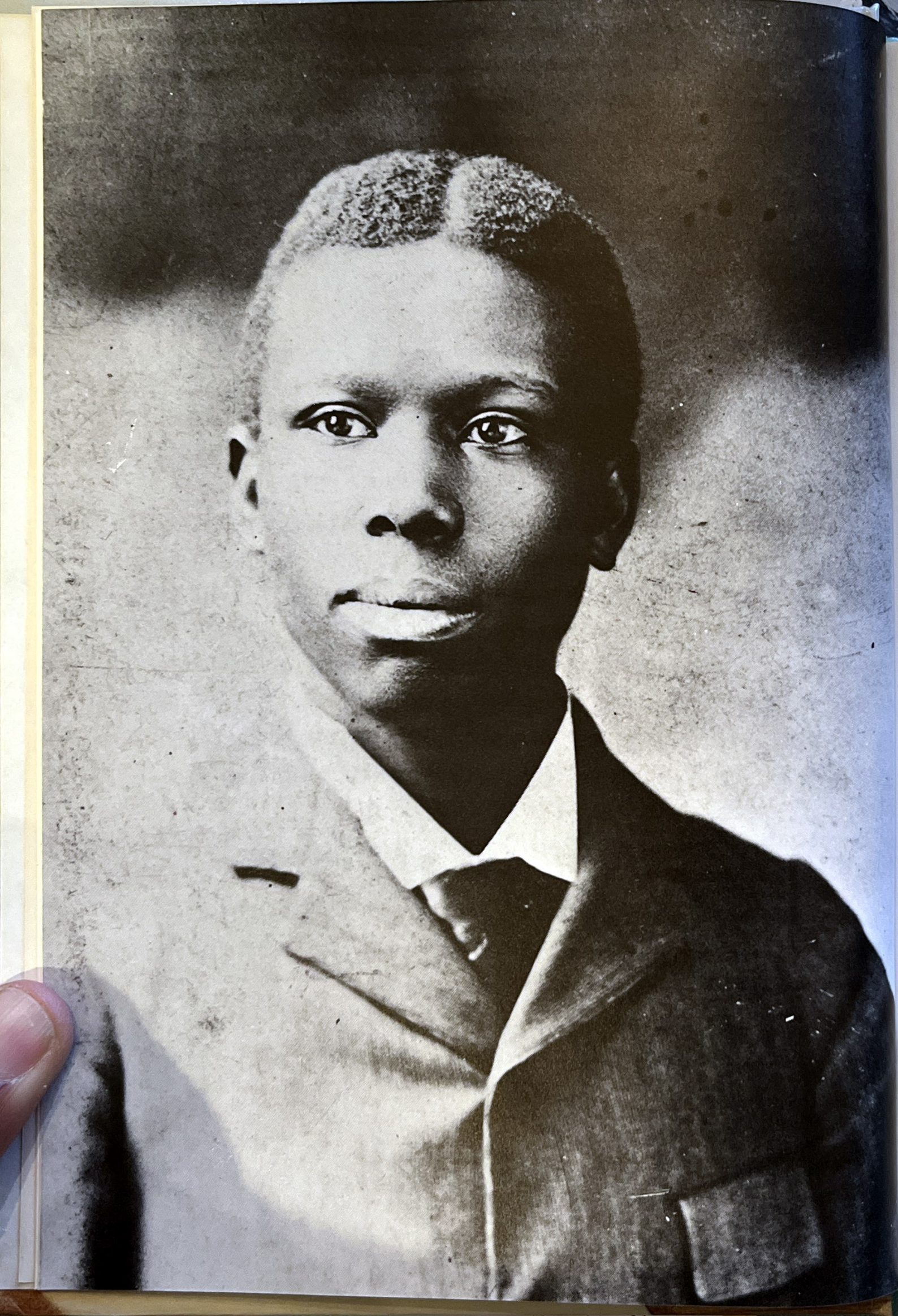


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INTRODUCTION

Dayton, Ohio, 1872

Many of the black people who settled in Ohio after the Civil War were former slaves. “Sittin’ out” was an old custom they had brought from the plantation days. During the long summer months—at a time when there were no air conditioners or electric fans—people sat on their porches or gathered in their yards to cool off and enjoy each other’s company.

On the evening of June 27, 1872, those who were sittin’ out on Howard Street, in the city of Dayton, paused when they heard the cry of a newborn child coming from the back bedroom of the Dunbar house. Matilda’s baby had been born. The neighbors acknowledged the birth by exchanging smiles, winks, handshakes, and even wistful sighs. Then they picked up their conversation where they had stopped.

Inside the Dunbar house, however, the newest family member was greeted with great joy and anticipation. Matilda pressed the tiny infant to her heart and kissed him. This baby was special; he was her first child born in freedom. She had no doubt that *this* baby could grow up to be anything he wanted, including president of the United States. He was a free man—born free! That’s what made anything—everything—possible.

"But first things first," thought Matilda. The baby had to have a proper name—an impressive-sounding name that would one day match his successful station in life. Matilda didn't see just a little baby in her arms. Her son was to be a great man, and all great people had grand names. No more ordinary names for any of Matilda's children.

Joshua Dunbar paced outside the "birthing room." Finally he was permitted to go inside. It was a very warm June evening and beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead. The first thing he did was pull back the sheet and look at the little brown baby snuggled against his mother.

Joshua smiled; then his smile broadened into a full grin; at last he threw back his head and laughed the laugh of a proud and happy father. "Some day he'll be a great man and do you honor," Joshua told Matilda. His wife nodded her agreement.

"His name should be Paul," Joshua said wiping away a happy tear. The light went out in Matilda's eyes. Her smile faded. She wasn't pleased with her husband's choice of names. Too often Matilda had heard the master of the plantation give his slaves names without meaning. What was the meaning of Paul?

Joshua explained that he was naming their baby after the Apostle Paul, who had been a teacher, preacher, and writer. "Paul was a great man," said Joshua, "and our son will be great too." Again Matilda nodded her agreement.

But her mind had been set on another name. She had heard the name in a poem that the plantation had read to her years before. Matilda's girl, had saved that beautiful name. When Matilda, the free woman, could give it to her son in freedom. "When I am free," she used to say, "I'll have babies whatever I want, and I won't have to ask for them from nobody." That time had finally come. She was a free woman, but—

"Laurence can be his middle name," she had said in hope. Paul Laurence Dunbar. Now it was her turn to nod his agreement. Then he smiled. Matilda had agreed. They had reached a happy compromise.

So it was, then, that when the honeysuckle was in bloom in 1872, the Dunbars named their son. In naming their child, Matilda and Joshua had somehow guaranteed his future greatness. Paul Laurence Dunbar did get a start toward success from the parents who believed in the American dream—possible for a free man.