





LIFE OF A *Portrait*

LAURA WHEELER WARING'S ANNA WASHINGTON DERRY

Valerie Harris

UNTIL RECENTLY, PAINTER LAURA WHEELER WARING (1887–1948) has been relegated to the sidelines in artist histories. A member of the African American elite, she specialized in portraits and figurative painting and did not share the hand-to-mouth experience of many of her fellow artists. Rather, she worked as an art instructor and choir director for nearly 40 years at the institution now known as Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, a situation, she would lament, that left her always scrambling to find time to paint. There is no doubt, however, that Waring maintained a successful career as an artist throughout her adult life. As family members and others have begun to exhibit and sell her earlier paintings, she has been gaining in name recognition. Recent auction sales of her early works range from \$5,000 to \$54,000. When the Smithsonian American Art Museum was asked to contribute to the article “Museums Celebrate the Black Women Artists History Has Overlooked,” published in *The Huffington Post* of February 20, 2017, they chose Waring—proof that her legitimate place in art history is beginning to be acknowledged.

The artist's contribution to Pennsylvania's cultural heritage is also undeniable. Among the well-known resident Pennsylvanians whose portraits she painted are the celebrated contralto Marian Anderson, *Philadelphia Tribune* founder and publisher Christopher J. Perry, the acclaimed husband and wife attorneys Raymond Pace Alexander and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, and Cheyney's first president Leslie Pinckney Hill. A Philadelphia middle school has been named in Waring's honor. A Pennsylvania Historical Marker stands sentry in front of the West Philadelphia house where Waring once lived. One could argue, however, that her most enduring home was at Cheyney, where she arrived as a novice teacher in 1907 and officially retired in 1946. Although Waring became closely associated with her portraits of high-profile members of the African American elite, her most celebrated painting—the one most often reproduced as an indication of Waring at the height of her artistic talent—is of an unheralded, working-class woman named Annie Washington Derry with whom the upper-middle-class Waring interacted while working at Cheyney.

The site of the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) was still evolving from a farm of 117 acres to an educational campus when 20-year-old Laura Wheeler arrived in the fall of 1907. Established in Philadelphia in 1837 and supported by Quakers, ICY had recently located about 23 miles west of the city to rural Chester County on farmland purchased from another member of the Society of Friends, George Cheyney. Hugh M. Browne (1851–1923), a well-respected educator and associate of Booker T. Washington, had been hired as principal at ICY in 1902 and had overseen the move from Philadelphia to the area then called Cheyney Station.

Laura Wheeler Waring at her easel.

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MANUSCRIPT DIVISION, HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, DC

Under Browne's leadership, ICY had already begun the process of reorganizing from a secondary school to a postsecondary normal school. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* emphasized that the "Training School for Colored Teachers at Cheyney" would prepare high school graduates "to become cooking, sewing, dressmaking and manual training teachers." But the mission of the reorganized ICY, as touted on its letterhead, was to "correlate academic and industrial education." In addition to agricultural training, which Browne fully supported, ICY would turn out African American teachers to educate and advance the next generation beyond the servant and laborer status of most of their parents. Thus was the beginning of Cheyney University—previously the Institute for Colored Youth (1837–1913), Cheyney Training School for Teachers (1913), and Cheyney State College (1951)—the coun-

try's oldest of the historically black colleges and universities (or HBCUs).

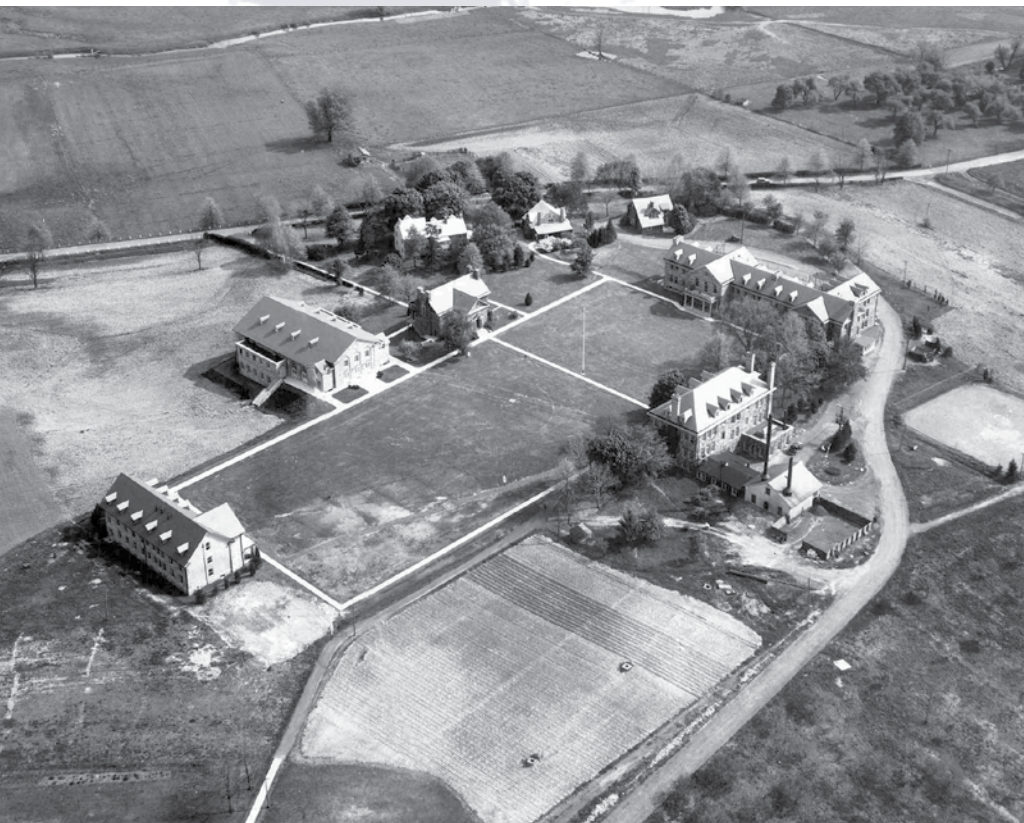
Teaching, however, was only a secondary aim of Laura Wheeler, although that profession was deeply embedded in her heritage. She was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1887 to college-educated parents—her mother Mary (Freeman) Wheeler, an Oberlin alumna, had taught school before her marriage; her father Robert Foster Wheeler, a graduate of the theological school at Howard University, was a well-known Congregational minister. Her maternal grandfather, Amos Noë Freeman, had been a teacher, too, before becoming a celebrated Presbyterian minister. Wheeler's older sister, a graduate of Smith College, had also chosen to become a teacher, one of the few professions open to educated African American women at that time, albeit a highly respected occupation. But, by the time

Wheeler was in high school, she had decided that she would be an artist. Further, she determined to study at the preeminent art school in the country, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA). Her family opted not to pay for her artist education, so she had to find a way to cover the fees to attend PAFA on her own. Her father had attended Howard with Hugh Browne, however, and he used this connection to get his daughter, only one year out of high school, a part-time position as an instructor in drawing and decorative art. Wheeler would receive a salary of about \$7 a month, room and board (she would have to pay for laundry service), and train fare to Philadelphia to begin her studies at PAFA.

Wheeler's new surroundings were quite different from the somber, commercially bustling cityscape of Hartford. She would have traveled from Connecticut on the Pennsylvania Railroad to Broad Street Station in Philadelphia, a massive and ornate structure, the largest train station in the country at that time. She would have spent another hour on a train to the outer regions of the city to disembark at Cheyney Station, a tiny country depot. There she would have been met by someone from the school and transported to her new home by horse and buggy—it would be another 10 years before the school owned a motor vehicle. The thick woods flanking the winding dirt roads made evening travel to the school darker than normal at twilight, and it would be pitch-black as the hour grew late, except on nights when the moon and stars would flood the sky. In a few months heavy snows would make these roads nearly impassable. No wonder many graduates of the formerly city-based ICY had protested the school's relocation to Cheyney. It was a far-flung and insulated locale.

At PAFA, Wheeler would study drawing, still life painting, portraiture and illustration, acquiring a traditionalist style typical of PAFA-trained artists. In 1914 she was the first African American to be awarded one of the academy's coveted Cresson Travel Scholarships, and it afforded her the opportunity to travel to Europe for the first time.

It's likely that the scenic views that Wheeler regularly encountered in her



Cheyney Training School for Teachers in the 1920s.
COURTESY CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

adopted environment at Cheyney compensated in some way for the scant time she had to pursue instruction in PAFA's studios. Long walks through the surrounding countryside were an official part of the school's recreation program. Her local rambles might take her past cattle grazing in fields of green and gold or through verdant meadows ablaze with wildflowers. She drew inspiration from the long, hilly roads that seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, roads bordered by trees of various kinds, full-leafed or stark and spindly, and from the farm houses, large white framed ones with green shutters or solid stone structures that sprung up intermittently, the generous space between each, ensuring quiet and privacy for their owners. She painted these views.

Students would later recall in a 1939 yearbook that "there has always been music at Cheyney." In addition to developing visual art education at the school, Wheeler was largely responsible for establishing the school's music program. She had been brought up to believe that no proper home should be without an appreciation of religious and classical music, and she brought this quality to her new home at Cheyney.

During the Hugh Browne years, ICY was a boarding school where the few faculty and staff lived like the extended family of the principal. With Browne's departure in 1913, and the arrival of Dr. Leslie Pinckney Hill, the Cheyney family, more than ever before, extended beyond the faculty and students to the area's small pockets of African American residents. An atmosphere of genteel collegiality and decorum was practiced by the Cheyney



Leslie Pinckney Hill (19XX, oil on canvas). Waring painted many of the faculty members at Cheyney including Hill, the school's first president.
CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES/© ESTATE OF LAURA WHEELER WARING (USED WITH PERMISSION)

faculty, who were expected to present themselves to the students and others as well-mannered, watchful and benevolent role models of the highest order, enlightening and encouraging them by instruction and personality.

Wheeler's life at Cheyney brought her in contact with the neighboring residents in various ways. The surrounding large farms and homesteads were chiefly owned by whites, many of them of the Quaker faith. It was not uncommon for the Cheyney faculty and students to witness the sight

and sounds of the white gentry engaged in rousing fox hunts across the hills nearby. Boys and men fished in Cheyney Creek and trapped and hunted in the woods. Participating in these last activities were members of a small community of African Americans who from the mid-1800s had established themselves along Cheyney Road in Thornbury Township, just south of the school. Many worked as domestic servants and at their own enterprises as haulers, shoemakers, blacksmiths and barbers. Others were employed at the



college, the Shelter for Colored Orphans, the Glen Mills Reform School, the paper mills, and the more dangerous jobs at several stone quarries in the area, including one on Glen Mills Road only two miles from the school. The quietude of study at the college might be disrupted at any time of the day by the jarring, stone-busting blasts from the quarry at Glen Mills.

The college, like the Thornbury African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, slowly evolved into a community center for the black residents of Cheyney. They rallied to the school to watch football and baseball games, hear esteemed speakers, and attend

concerts performed by the Cheyney Singers, which Wheeler conducted. She took the students to sing at Thornbury AME and would present joint concerts with the two choirs during the holidays and on other special occasions.

The Derry family were members of the Thornbury AME Church, where the community had worshipped since the 1870s. These entities—the church, the choir, the school—formed the intersection at which Annie Washington Derry and Laura Wheeler undoubtedly met.

Derry was of the same generation as Wheeler's parents. She was born Annie

Marie Washington in Maryland around 1858 (other dates given are 1849 and 1851), one of five children of George and Nancy Washington. Her father soon moved the family to the town of Stroudsburg, Monroe County, in the Pocono Mountains area of eastern Pennsylvania. Stroudsburg was home to a smattering of free blacks, some having arrived via the Underground Railroad, others having immigrated to the area seeking better conditions than could be found in the neighboring slave states of Delaware and Maryland. Annie Marie's father worked as a day laborer while her older brothers, Daniel and Moses Washington, served in the 8th Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. By the early 1880s young Annie, on her own and working as a domestic servant, made her way down from the Poconos to rural Delaware County. There she met Benjamin Derry, a single father, several years her senior, with two children, a boy and a girl. After the couple married in 1882, they lived at 421 East 17th Street in the Chester Heights section of Aston Township and began raising their family, adding five more children to Benjamin's two.

In the years preceding the portrait, Annie Washington Derry worked as a laundress, while her husband worked as a day laborer. As circumstances changed, she lived at various times on her own at the house in Chester Heights, with younger son Norwood and his family, and finally with eldest son Samuel, his wife Minerva, and their four children on Locksley Road in Cheyney. All were still affiliated with Thornbury AME Church, and both Samuel and Minerva were employed at Cheyney Training School for Teachers, with Samuel working as a laborer and groundskeeper.

By the 1920s, despite her responsibilities at Cheyney, Wheeler was a recognized and exhibited painter and a frequent contributing illustrator for *The Crisis*, the NAACP's monthly magazine edited by the activist intellectual W.E.B. DuBois. In 1924 Wheeler took a sabbatical from Cheyney to spend a full year and a half of study in Paris. By August 1925 she was back in the

U.S., ready to resume her duties at the school. The portrait of Annie Washington Derry was painted in the fall of that year.

This woman of humble origins was far from the artist's usual subject matter. Wheeler typically painted family members and friends and actively sought opportunities to paint high-profile, socially prominent and esteemed citizens, black and white. Although she would execute a series of portraits of accomplished African Americans in the 1940s that has been widely documented and exhibited, *Anna Washington Derry* has been cited as her most successful portrait.

Anna Washington Derry is a painting executed in subdued tones of brown, gray and beige. It is interesting to consider the treatment—in terms of color and other elements—in this painting in comparison with another of the artist's portraits that followed.

Evangeline Rachel Hall, painted around 1930, portrays the educator and Wheeler's long-time colleague at Cheyney as a mature, refined and educated woman, serene in her heritage and her achievements. Her pale, lightly patterned dress, draped on even paler skin, and her elongated face and pursed mouth give the impression of purity and untouchable respectability. She wears a corsage, not unlike an honored member of an exclusive sorority. She is clearly a member of the black middle class, the kind of person who inhabited Wheeler's personal and professional sphere.

Opposite, W. E. B. Du Bois (before 1948, oil on canvas). The famous author and civil rights activist was one of Waring's many prominent African American sitters.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION (GIFT OF WALTER WARING IN MEMORY OF HIS WIFE, LAURA WHEELER WARING, THROUGH THE HARMON FOUNDATION)/© ESTATE OF LAURA WHEELER WARING (USED WITH PERMISSION)

Right, Marian Anderson (1944, oil on canvas). Waring painted this portrait of the popular contralto for the Harmon Foundation, an organization that supported and promoted achievement of African American artists.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION (GIFT OF THE HARMON FOUNDATION)/© ESTATE OF LAURA WHEELER WARING (USED WITH PERMISSION)





Evangeline Rachel Hall (c. 1930, oil on canvas). This portrait of a Cheyney faculty member reflects the distinctive style Waring employed for portraits of the African American elite.
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Anna Washington Derry has not the ethereal idealism of *Evangeline Rachel Hall*. The elderly woman's face, her eyes, the set of her lips, and the slight tilt of her head convey resignation, self-awareness, even pride. In traditional portraiture, ladies are often painted with their hands resting demurely in their laps, perhaps holding a small book—as in *Evangeline Rachel Hall*, in which the subject even raises her pinky finger as she turns the page. The hands in *Anna Washington Derry*—well-oiled but worn—are rested on her forearms, her arms folded just below her breasts in a position of strength. Her left hand displays not the elegance of a raised finger, but the solidity of a gold wedding band. The

elderly woman's hair is dark brown, showing little to no graying, and is brushed back, anchored by a soft braid just above her ear.

Starting at the upper left of the background, with the letters placed beside and behind the subject's head, the artist has painted the name "Anna Washington Derry." This is actually the artist's own variation on the subject's name. In most of the documents that I have located—census records, family death certificates—the subject's name is the more colloquial "Annie." Adding to the formalization of her subject's persona, the artist has dated the picture with the Latin inscription "Anno Domini 192__" (In the Year of Our Lord).

This cultural reference is perhaps a reflection in the artist's mind of the sitter's natural dignity. At the bottom right corner of the canvas, the artist has signed the painting in bold print:
 L. Wheeler.

On Sunday, March 14, 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Carl R. Diton hosted a rather large gathering of black professionals and socialites, along with several affluent and progressive white associates, in their West Philadelphia home for afternoon tea. Diton was a noted concert pianist, composer and cofounder of the National Association of Negro Musicians. More than 40 of Wheeler's drawings and paintings—landscapes, figure studies and portraits, including *Anna Washington Derry*—were displayed throughout the house, while the hosts and guest of honor were kept busy greeting a steady stream of viewers. An article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* named a number of those in attendance, among them Anne Biddle Stirling, daughter of the prominent Quaker family and member of the Philadelphia Interracial Committee. Already the owner of a Wheeler painting, Stirling was said to be purchasing another one. Reportedly, seven paintings were sold on the day. *Anna Washington Derry* was not among them, although the *Tribune* article singles the painting out as "remarkable." The well-heeled guests were not likely to choose an image of an elderly servant, especially one having no relationship to the family, to grace the walls of their homes.

In August 1927, more than a year after the first public viewing of *Anna Washington Derry*, Laura Wheeler Waring (now married to Lincoln University professor Walter Waring), submitted the painting and 10 other works with her application for the New York-based Harmon Foundation's fine art award. An internal document dated December 12, 1927, declared that the judges "wished the first Award to be granted to



Anna Washington Derry (1927, oil of canvas). The portrait of Derry is one of Waring's most acclaimed works.

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM (GIFT OF THE HARMON FOUNDATION) / © ESTATE OF LAURA WHEELER WARING (USED WITH PERMISSION)

Laura Wheeler Waring for her whole group of pictures, with special mention of the picture marked '61': 'Anna Washington Derry.'” The awards and the names of the winning artists were announced nationally to much media attention. Almost immediately, the Harmon Foundation mounted an exhibition of artwork submitted to the competition in New York. The exhibition’s catalog included a full-page reproduction of *Anna Washington Derry*. The caption read, “First Award in Fine Art—Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement

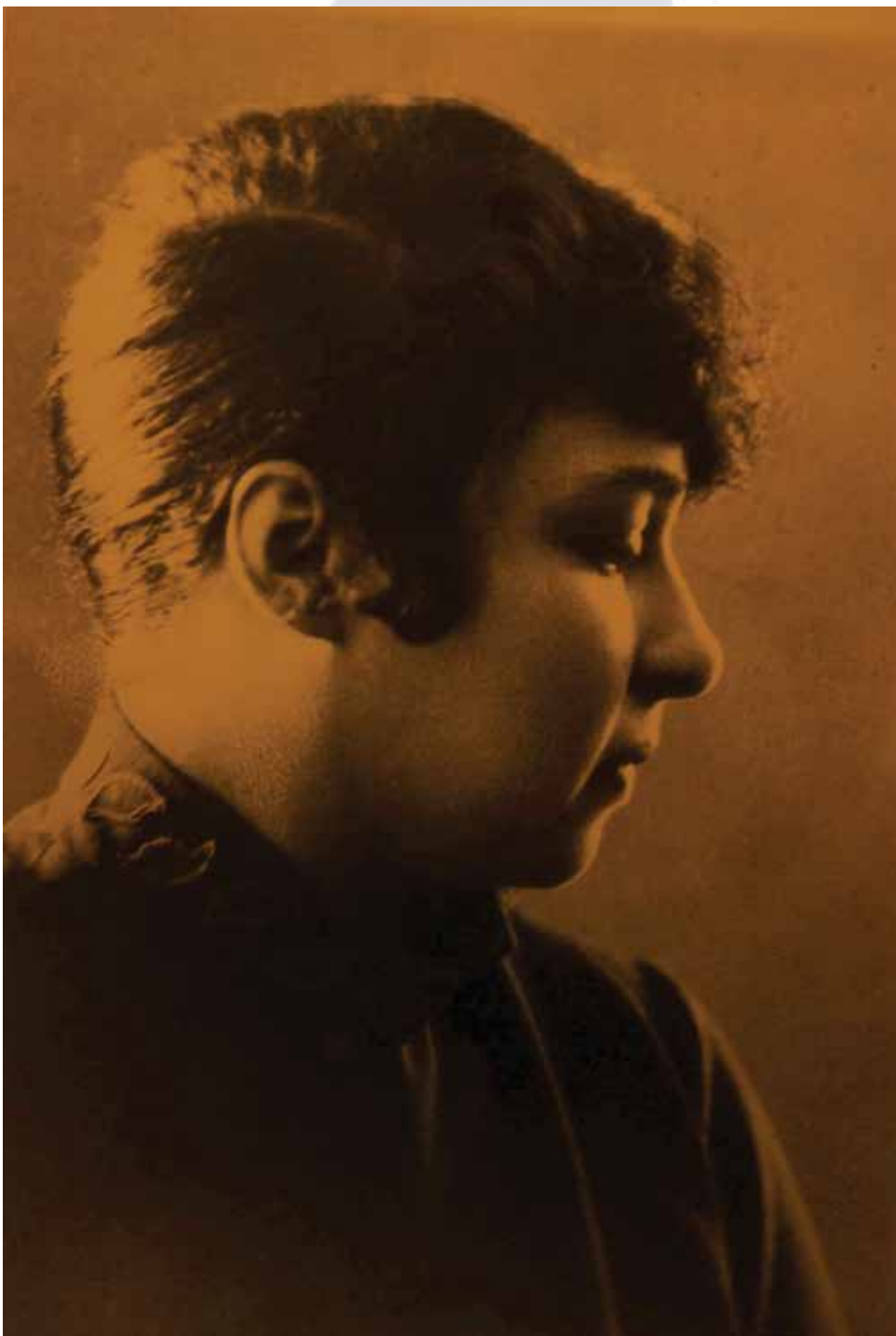
Among Negroes.” One wonders what Derry thought of this acclaim, of which she was surely aware. In Philadelphia, Waring’s achievement, which came with a medal and a cash prize of \$400, was well publicized. Attempts were made to have Waring’s paintings—including, presumably, the winning portrait—mounted in one of the display windows of the John Wanamaker Department Store in downtown Philadelphia. When a window at Wanamaker’s proved unavailable, however, the C. J. Heppe & Son Piano Store, a nationally known concern

a few blocks from Wanamaker’s, did the honors. In February, Philadelphia’s mayor Harry Mackey officially conferred the Harmon Award upon Waring at an event that took place at high-toned Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church on Broad Street. Undoubtedly, Waring’s closest associates at Cheyney, including Evangeline R. Hall and President Leslie Pinckney Hill, were in attendance. But everyone affiliated with the school would have been aware of the achievement and honor bestowed upon their “Mrs. Waring,” including employees Samuel and Minerva Derry, the son and daughter-in-law of Annie Washington Derry. Their elderly mother was living with them or very close by at the time.

Anna Washington Derry would travel far more widely than the rural laundress it represented ever did. The portrait was shown in several cities over the next several months as part of the Harmon Foundation exhibition tour. In August 1929, while traveling with her husband in Europe, Waring wrote to Harmon Foundation director Mary Beattie Brady that she had exhibited “Mrs. Derry” at les galeries du Luxembourg in Paris earlier that summer. In subsequent years, the painting has been regularly exhibited and reproduced in publications. In February 1932, during Negro Achievement Week, Waring visited her hometown of Hartford, where she was hailed as a successful artist and treated to a show of her work at the YWCA. The notice in the *Hartford Courant* declared, “Best of the portraits is that of Anna Washington Derry, which, although of a dull tonality, is convincing in its revelation of character and pleasing in its composition.” A 1936 *Philadelphia Tribune* article on the Negro Art Exhibit at the Texas Centennial mentions a “notable portrait” of an old colored woman by Laura Wheeler Waring. Four years later, the comprehensive landmark pictorial *The Negro in Art* was

Waring around the time she painted *Anna Washington Derry*.

COURTESY MADELINE MURPHY RABB





Laura Wheeler Waring, seated right, in her later years with Harmon Foundation director Mary Beattie Brady, seated left, at a portrait exhibition at Roosevelt House.
NATIONAL ARCHIVES (HN-HNE-22-15)

published. Waring is represented by *Anna Washington Derry*.

Annie Washington Derry, a matriarch of her community, died on October 6, 1930, at age 81. She was buried in the Thornbury A.M.E. Church cemetery in Cheyney among the gravesites of her husband and extended family members. Laura Wheeler Waring died on February 3, 1948, at her home in West Philadelphia and was buried in Eden Cemetery, Collingdale, Delaware County, in her husband's family plot under a modest headstone that bears only the single name "Waring."

At some point, perhaps as a gift from Waring's husband, *Anna Washington Derry* became the property of the Harmon Foundation. Upon the dissolution of the foundation in 1967, hundreds of pieces of art from its collection were distributed to Hampton University, Fisk University, and other educational institutions. An even greater number went to the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). Waring's most artistically significant portrait, *Anna Washington Derry*, was among the works that the foun-

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 dation gave to the Smithsonian 40 years after the organization had bestowed upon the painting its highest award. It remains part of the Smithsonian's permanent collection.

Valerie Harris is a graduate of Cheyney State College and a communications professional at the University of Pennsylvania. She wrote and produced the film *A Highway Runs Through It . . .* (2011), which documents the history of African Americans in Darby Township, Delaware County. She is currently at work on a biography of Laura Wheeler Waring.