

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

Light Across the Water

Henry Ossawa Tanner and an Exile Toward Recognition

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA III-V • Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania & Paris, France

Who He Is

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born June 21, 1859, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of an African Methodist Episcopal bishop; his middle name honored Osawatomie, Kansas, the site of John Brown's 1856 anti-slavery raid. He enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1879, becoming its first Black student, and studied there under the celebrated realist painter Thomas Eakins, who painted Tanner's portrait in return — a rare gesture of professional respect across the color line in that era.

Georgia, and a Gallery of His Own

After his Philadelphia training, Tanner spent time in Atlanta, where he opened a photography studio that ultimately failed, and taught briefly at Clark College. Discouraged by the racism he encountered pursuing an art career in the United States — galleries and patrons routinely dismissed Black artists regardless of their training — he left for Europe in 1891, settling in Paris, which then offered Black American artists a far more open reception than the American gallery system did.

The Banjo Lesson and Religious Painting

In 1893, on a return visit to the United States, Tanner painted *The Banjo Lesson*, showing an older Black man teaching a boy to play — a deliberate answer to the era's demeaning minstrel caricatures of Black musicians, rendered instead with quiet intimacy and dignity. The painting is now considered one of the most important works by an African American artist of the nineteenth century. Tanner then turned increasingly toward religious subjects, and his 1897 painting *The Resurrection of Lazarus* was purchased by the French government for the Musée du Luxembourg and won a medal at the Paris Salon — a level of official French recognition almost no American artist, of any race, achieved at that time. He became the first African American artist elected a full member of the National Academy of Design, in 1927, and was named a chevalier of the French Legion of Honor in 1923.

"I will not allow any man to drag me down to his level by making me hate him." — Attributed to Henry Ossawa Tanner

Tanner remained based in France for the rest of his life, dying in Paris on May 25, 1937, at seventy-seven.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina connection was found for Henry Ossawa Tanner in any source consulted for this research pass. His American life centered on Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and a period in Atlanta before his 1891 departure for France, where he remained. This entry claims no NC or Cumberland County tie.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Attributed quote: widely repeated in secondary sources but not traced to a specific primary document in this pass — treat as attributed rather than verbatim-confirmed.

Atlanta photography studio: details of its failure and exact dates are thinly sourced; confirm against Atlanta University or Clark College archival records if available.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Henry Ossawa Tanner," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pafa.org/>.
2. "Henry Ossawa Tanner," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/henry-ossawa-tanner-4658>.
3. Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
4. "The Banjo Lesson," Hampton University Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.hamptonu.edu/museum/>.
5. "Henry Ossawa Tanner," National Gallery of Art, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1732.html>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.