

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

Uplift, Not Applause

Augusta Savage and the Students She Refused to Abandon

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA IV–VI • Green Cove Springs, Florida

Who She Is

Augusta Christine Fells Savage was born February 29, 1892, in Green Cove Springs, Florida, one of fourteen children of a Methodist minister who, by her own account, whipped her as a child for making clay figures he considered sinful graven images. She persisted anyway, and by the early 1920s had moved to New York, where she was admitted to Cooper Union's tuition-free art program and quickly became one of the defining sculptors of the Harlem Renaissance.

A Prize Rescinded

In 1923, Savage applied for a summer arts program in France sponsored by the French government; after her acceptance, the American selection committee withdrew it once they learned she was Black, on the grounds that white Southern students in the group would object to traveling and living alongside her. Savage fought the decision publicly, writing to newspapers and arts officials, and though the rejection stood, the episode drew national attention to the routine exclusion of Black artists from opportunities available to their white peers.

"I have accomplished as much as I have because I have refused to sit and mourn over discrimination. I work and wait." — Augusta Savage

Teacher First

Savage's greatest and most consequential legacy was as a teacher. She founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem, then directed the Harlem Community Art Center under the WPA's Federal Art Project beginning in 1937, mentoring and materially supporting a generation of Black artists including Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Gwendolyn Knight, and Kenneth Clark — several of whom credited her studio and her willingness to buy them art supplies out of her own pocket as the reason they had a path into art at all. In 1939 she was commissioned to create *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (popularly called *The Harp*) for the New York World's Fair — a monumental sculpture, sixteen feet tall, of stylized Black singers forming the strings of a harp — one of the fair's most celebrated works, and one for which she had no funds to cast in bronze or preserve; it was bulldozed as scrap at the fair's close in 1940, and survives today only in photographs and small souvenir replicas.

Savage largely withdrew from public art-making in her later years, moving to a farm in Saugerties, New York, and taking work as a laboratory technician; she died in New York City on March 26, 1962, at seventy.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina connection was found for Augusta Savage in this research pass. A thin 1920 U.S. census entry lists her mother's birthplace as North Carolina without naming a county, which is not usable as a real connection to the state and is not treated as one here. This entry claims no NC or Cumberland County tie for Savage herself. Her student Selma Burke, a sculptor in her own right, was from Mooresville, Iredell County, North Carolina — worth noting only as a possible future cross-reference if Burke is ever profiled separately; it is not a connection belonging to Savage's own entry.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

No real NC tie: the only NC-adjacent data point is an unspecific census note about her mother's birthplace — do not build this into a stated connection.

The Harp's fate: widely reported as destroyed/bulldozed at the 1940 World's Fair closing due to lack of funds for preservation; treat exact circumstances as reported rather than independently re-verified here.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Augusta Savage," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/augusta-savage-4053>.
2. Jeffreen M. Hayes, ed., *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2018).
3. "Augusta Savage," New-York Historical Society, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nyhistory.org/>.
4. "Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/>.
5. "Augusta Savage," BlackPast.org, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/savage-augusta-1892-1962/>.

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