

Henrietta Vinton Davis, from L. A. Scruggs, *Women of Distinction* (1893). Public domain.

1860 BALTIMORE · 1941 WASHINGTON

HENRIETTA VINTON DAVIS

TEACHER · COPYIST · SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR · PLAYWRIGHT · INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZER OF THE UNIA · BLACK STAR LINE DIRECTOR

Before the UNIA, she was already famous: one of the first Black women to make a career in classical drama, introduced on her first night by Frederick Douglass. In 1919 she gave up the stage for Garvey's movement, and spent the next twenty years building it across the Caribbean and leading it after him.

> *"She is entirely devoted to the upbuilding of her race, and believes the solution of the vexed problem lies in the hands of the Negro."*
>
> L. A. SCRUGGS, WOMEN OF DISTINCTION, 1893, P. 88

ACT I · THE STAGE

1860–1918

1860	Born in Baltimore. Her father, Mansfield Vinton Davis, was a musician; he died soon after her birth.
Age 15	Passes the exam to teach in Maryland's public schools; later teaches in Louisiana.
1878	Copyist in the Recorder of Deeds office in Washington, D.C., until 1884. Wikipedia calls her the first Black woman employed there.
1883	Studies with Marguerite E. Saxton. Debuts 25 April in Washington, introduced by Frederick Douglass; tours Boston, Hartford and New Haven that summer.
1884–	Shakespeare and classical tragedy. Wikipedia calls her the first African American after Ira Aldridge to perform Shakespeare successfully.
1893	Starts her own company in Chicago. Stages plays about the Haitian Revolution: *Dessalines* (1893) and *Henri Christophe* (1912).

ACT II · THE MOVEMENT

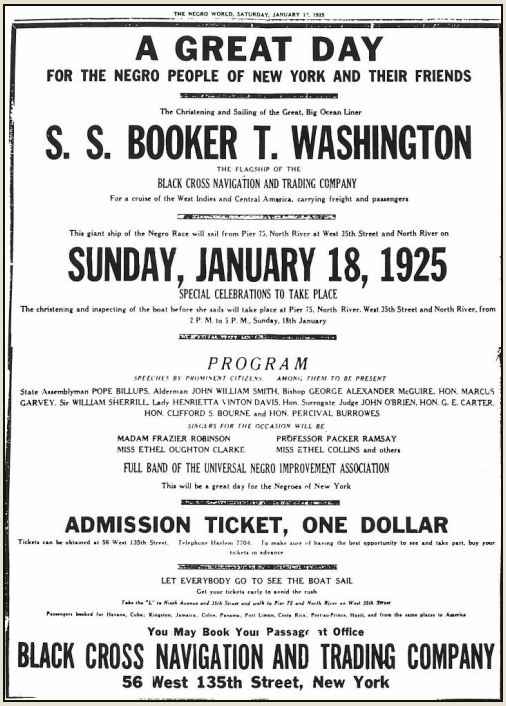
1919–1927

1919	Speaks at a UNIA meeting at the Palace Casino in Harlem, June 15. Named among the first directors of the Black Star Line.
1920	Elected International Organizer. Signs the Declaration of Rights in August. Most accounts credit her with founding the Black Cross Nurses.
1920s	Builds UNIA divisions in Cuba, Guadeloupe, St. Thomas, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.
1921	Fourth Assistant President-General.
1924	Travels to Liberia in December, the only woman in the UNIA delegation seeking land for a colony.
1925	On the program for the christening of the *Booker T. Washington* (see side two). Tours the Caribbean with Maymie de Mena as translator.

SOURCES: L. A. SCRUGGS, WOMEN OF DISTINCTION (1893), PP. 85–88, VIA WIKISOURCE (EARLY LIFE, RECORDER OF DEEDS, DEBUT); WIKIPEDIA, "HENRIETTA VINTON DAVIS" (PLAYS, UNIA OFFICES, LIBERIA); MILTON H. WATSON, "BLACK STAR LINE," STEAMBOAT BILL, P. 264 (1919 DIRECTORS). BLACK STAR ARCHIVE × RADICAL IMAGINATION.

FROM THE FOOTLIGHTS TO THE PLATFORM

SHE WAS STILL ON THE PROGRAM FORTY-TWO YEARS LATER



THE NEGRO WORLD, SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 1925

A GREAT DAY

FOR THE NEGRO PEOPLE OF NEW YORK AND THEIR FRIENDS

The Christening and Sailing of the Great, Big Ocean Liner

S. S. BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

THE FLAGSHIP OF THE

BLACK CROSS NAVIGATION AND TRADING COMPANY

For a cruise of the West Indies and Central America, carrying freight and passengers

This giant ship of the Negro Race will sail from Pier 75, North River at West 35th Street and North River on

SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 1925

SPECIAL CELEBRATIONS TO TAKE PLACE

The christening and inspecting of the boat before she sails will take place at Pier 75, North River, West 35th Street and North River, from 2 P. M. to 5 P. M., Sunday, 18th January

PROGRAM

SPEECHES BY PROMINENT CITIZENS. AMONG THEM TO BE PRESENT

State Assemblyman POPE BILLUPS, Alderman JOHN WILLIAM SMITH, Bishop GEORGE ALEXANDER McGUIRE, HON. MARCUS GARVEY, Sir WILLIAM SHERRILL, Lady HENRIETTA VINTON DAVIS, Hon. Surrogate Judge JOHN O'BRIEN, HON. G. E. CARTER, HON. CLIFFORD S. BOURNE and HON. PERCIVAL BURROWES

SINGERS FOR THE OCCASION WILL BE

MADAM FRAZIER ROBINSON PROFESSOR PACKER RAMSAY

MISS ETHEL OUGHTON CLARKE MISS ETHEL COLLINS and others

FULL BAND OF THE UNIVERSAL NEGRO IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

This will be a great day for the Negroes of New York

ADMISSION TICKET, ONE DOLLAR

Tickets can be obtained at 56 West 135th Street. Telephone Harlem 2704. To make sure of having the best opportunity to see and take part, buy your tickets in advance

LET EVERYBODY GO TO SEE THE BOAT SAIL

Get your tickets early to avoid the rush

Take the "L" to Ninth Avenue and 26th Street and walk to Pier 75 and North River or West 25th Street

Passengers booked for Havana, Cuba; Kingston, Jamaica, Colon, Panama, Port Limon, Costa Rica, Port-au-Prince, Hayti, and from the same places to America

You May Book Your Passage at Office

BLACK CROSS NAVIGATION AND TRADING COMPANY

56 West 135th Street, New York

Negro World, 17 January 1925: the christening of the S.S. *Booker T. Washington*. The speakers include "Lady Henrietta Vinton Davis." As reproduced in Watson, Steamboat Bill, p. 271.

ACT III · AFTER GARVEY

1927–1941

1929	Elected UNIA Secretary General at the international convention.
1932	Breaks with Garvey; becomes First Assistant President-General of the rival UNIA, Inc.
1934	Elected president of the rival organization, serving until 1940.
1941	Dies 23 November in Washington, D.C., at 81.

> *Garvey called her "the greatest woman of the Negro race today."*
>
> AS QUOTED IN WIKIPEDIA, CITING HILL, ED., GARVEY PAPERS, VOL. II

Scruggs adds two more details: Davis believed "the education of the hand, the head and the heart is the prime necessity of the hour," and she invented a dress-cutting chart to teach sewing in rural districts.

Where the sources disagree

- **Birthday:** 25 August 1860 (Wikipedia) or 29 September 1860 (African American Registry).
- **Joining the UNIA:** 1918 or 1919. **International Organizer:** 1919 or 1920.
- ***Our Old Kentucky Home*:** co-written with John Edward Bruce (Wikipedia). One site credits Stephen Foster, who died in 1864, before she was four.
- **Black Cross Nurses:** Philadelphia, 1920, or Kansas City, 1921? And was Isabella Lawrence of Belize the international president?
- **Later offices:** Wikipedia contradicts itself, giving both 1927 and 1929 for the step after Garvey's deportation.

GO DEEPER · This week's reading is about her: Natanya Duncan, "'If Our Men Hesitate Then the Women of the Race Must Come Forward': Henrietta Vinton Davis and the UNIA in New York," *New York History* 95, no. 4 (2014). The Black Cross Nurses handout (Session 4) picks up her health corps.

Why would a famous actor give up the stage for a movement in 1919?

What did a Shakespearean training give an organizer on a speaking tour of the Caribbean?

She led a rival UNIA after breaking with Garvey. Does that change how we remember her?

ACT III, 1924 AND 1925 TOURS, DEATH: WIKIPEDIA, "HENRIETTA VINTON DAVIS" (CITING THE EVENING STAR, 25 NOV 1941). BIRTH DATE: WIKIPEDIA; AFRICAN AMERICAN REGISTRY. QUOTES FROM SCRUGGS READ OFF THE WIKISOURCE TRANSCRIPTION OF THE 1893 EDITION. BLACK STAR ARCHIVE × RADICAL IMAGINATION.