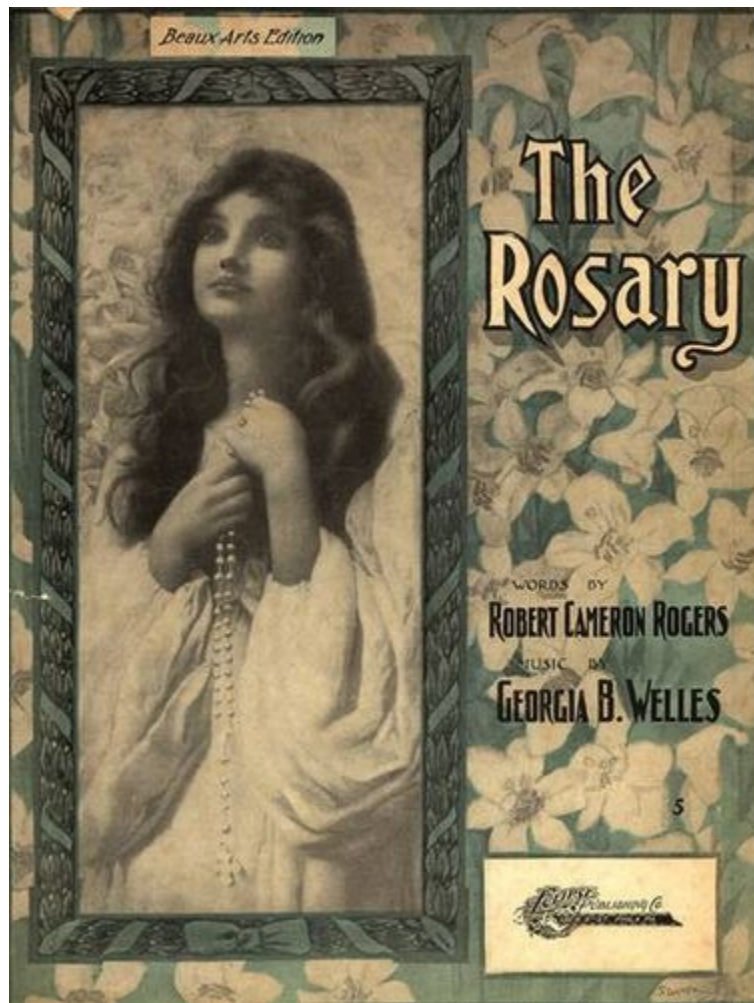


Duke Ellington's Early Years

The text and images are from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.

Duke Ellington was born in Washington D.C., and from an early age he loved music. When he was four years old, he listened to his mother play a popular piano tune called "The Rosary" and he cried, saying, "It was so pretty. So pretty." Not long after that, at the age of seven, he began to play piano himself. It seems that he knew he was going to go places. He told his next door neighbor, Mr. Pinn, "One of these days I'm going to be famous." How old do you think Duke Ellington was when he started writing music?



Front cover of "The Rosary" sheet music from 1903

At age 15, Ellington worked at a soda fountain and wrote his first song, "Soda Fountain Rag." By his late teens, he was making enough money to help his parents move into a better house. One of Ellington's first professional gigs was a party where he played so long that his hand bled. He earned 75 cents. "It was the most money I had ever seen," he said. "I rushed all the

way home to my mother with it. But I could not touch a piano key for weeks" What do you think was Ellington's next move?



A drug store with a soda fountain like this one inspired "Soda Fountain Rag."

Ellington studied music during the ragtime era. Ragtime was a kind of popular American music consisting of off-beat dance rhythms that began with the honky-tonk pianists along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. By the time he was 20, he and his friends formed a band that would be the foundation for his life's work. From 1923 to 1927, he and his band lived in New York City and made about 60 recordings. Their first big break came on December 4, 1927, at the opening night of what would turn out to be a long engagement at the Cotton Club in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. The Ellington Orchestra often broadcast live on radio from the Cotton Club, so their unique style of jazz became familiar to people across the country.



James P. Johnson, the "Father of Stride Piano," was a friend and teacher of Ellington's.