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PROFESSION



The new tombstone of Dr. James McCune Smith, the nation's first black medical degree holder, is unveiled during a ceremony at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, N.Y. Dr. Smith's great-granddaughter Antoinette Martignoni, left, and great-great-granddaughter Judy Gerlitz share a moment during the event. [Photo by Tina Fineberg / AP / Wide World Photos]

New recognition for first black U.S. doctor with medical degree

Dr. James McCune Smith's descendants unveiled a new headstone in a ceremony to commemorate his achievements as a physician, essayist and abolitionist.

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, amednews staff. Posted Nov. 8, 2010.

The New York City burial site of the nation's first black medical degree-holder received a new headstone -- one provided by his white descendants in a recent public ceremony.

Dr. James McCune Smith received his medical degree at the University of Glasgow in Scotland in 1837, forced to go overseas for his education due to U.S. colleges' racist admissions policies. Historians say the training provided at European medical schools at that time was, ironically, superior to that offered in the U.S.

Greta Blau, Dr. Smith's great-great-great-granddaughter, learned that she was descended from the doctor after finding his name inscribed in a family Bible. She recognized the name from a history paper she had written years earlier in college.

After confirming the family connection through genealogical research, Blau learned that Dr. Smith's five surviving children passed, lived and identified as white in society after he died in 1865.

Dr. Smith treated both black and white patients in New York City. He was the first black doctor to write a medical case report -- presented to the New York Medical and Surgical Society in 1840.

He also was the first black physician to have a medical scientific paper published, in the *New York Journal of Medicine* in 1844, and was a prominent essayist who attacked slavery and racial theories positing blacks' inferiority. He was a friend of Frederick Douglass and wrote the introduction to his 1855 autobiography.

Blau located Dr. Smith's burial site at Brooklyn's Cypress Hills Cemetery and was dismayed by what she found -- the headstone had fallen face down and no longer was legible.

"I thought, 'I can't believe this,'" Blau said. "He was good, good friends with Frederick Douglass. He was the first black doctor with a medical degree. I just thought it was really sad that people didn't know about him, except for academics. I felt really compelled to put a new headstone there."

Social activist

For Dr. Smith, medical practice went hand-in-hand with attention to social conditions, said Vanessa Northington Gamble, MD, PhD, professor of medical humanities and health policy and American studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

"Part of his being a political and social activist was inextricably linked to being a physician," said Dr. Gamble, who spoke at a panel discussion at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Harlem after the September headstone unveiling ceremony.

"He gave lectures where he criticized theories of black inferiority. He also debunked the 1840 Census that said



Portrait of Dr. James McCune Smith, circa 1860.

[Etching by Fotosearch / Getty Images]



Antoinette Martignoni, left, and her

slaves lived longer and healthier lives than free blacks. ... One of the things he talked about was that he saw race as a social category, not a biological one."

Blau, who lives in New Haven, Conn., said she hopes the new headstone will help make his role in history more widely known.

"They're going to have a tour there now at the cemetery, and people will find out who he was," Blau said. "There are 60 people there who are notable burials, and he's one of them."

"If you do this much in your life, if you're that exceptional, if you've gone through as much as he went through in his life -- you should have some recognition. All I could do was this headstone, so that's what I did."

The print version of this content appeared in the **Nov. 15** issue of *American Medical News*.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Milestones of a black medical pioneer

1813: Born in New York City to former slaves.

1822: Enrolls in African Free School 2 on Mulberry Street in New York.

1832: Travels to Glasgow, Scotland, to pursue postsecondary studies due to racist admissions policies at U.S. colleges.

1835-37: Earns bachelor's, master's and medical degrees from the University of Glasgow. Completes a medical internship in Paris.

1837: Opens general medical and surgical practice in New York City treating black and white patients.

1840: Becomes first black American physician to write a case report, which is presented to the New York Medical and Surgical Society. A white colleague presents the report because the society fears that allowing Dr. Smith to do so would "interfere with the 'harmony' of the young institution."

1846: Appointed physician for the Colored Orphan Asylum at Fifth Avenue and 44th Street. Paid \$100 a year. Publishes statistical research disputing the findings of the 1840 U.S. Census, which contended that enslaved blacks lived longer and healthier lives than free blacks.

1853: Becomes first black doctor to publish a scientific paper -- a description of five women whose opium use led to cessation of menses. It ran in the *New York Journal of Medicine*.

1855: Writes introduction to Frederick Douglass' autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass cited Dr. Smith as the single most important influence in his life.

1859: Publishes essay disputing the racial theories laid out in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

1865: Dies of congestive heart failure on Long Island, N.Y., shortly before passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. His five children go on to pass and live as white people.

2004: Great-great-granddaughter Greta Blau finds Dr. Smith's name inscribed in family Bible.

2010: Blau and other white descendants unveil new headstone for Dr. Smith at Brooklyn's Cypress Hills Cemetery.

Sources: "The education and medical practice of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865), first black American to hold a medical degree," *Journal of the National Medical Assn.*, July 2003 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12911258)

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granddaughter Greta Blau with a family Bible that contains the name of their ancestor, Dr. James McCune Smith.

[Photo by Jessica Hill / AP / Wide World Photos]