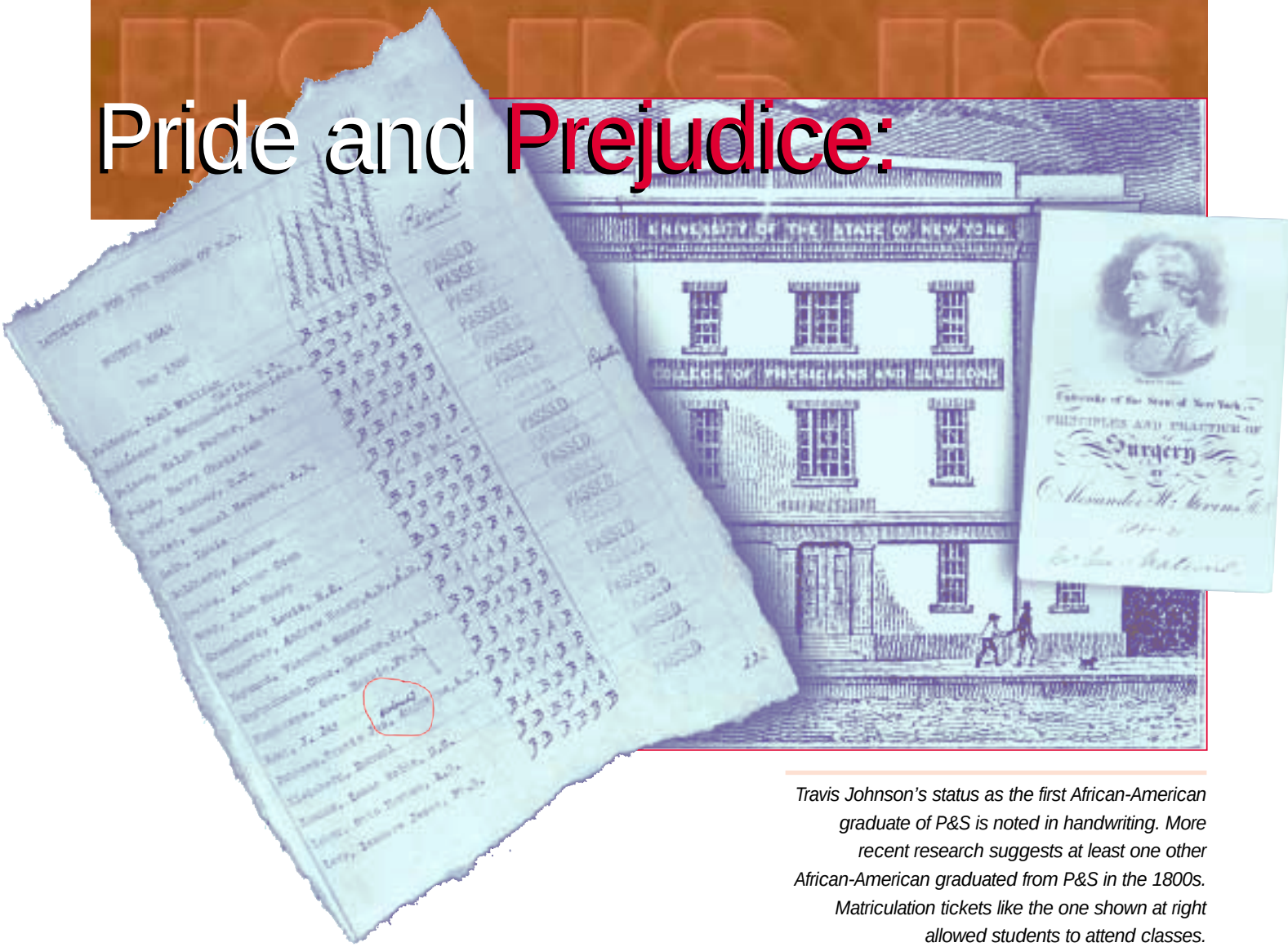
Pride and Prejudice:



Travis Johnson's status as the first African-American graduate of P&S is noted in handwriting. More recent research suggests at least one other African-American graduated from P&S in the 1800s. Matriculation tickets like the one shown at right allowed students to attend classes.

By Russell W. Irvine, Ph.D.

Travis J.A. Johnson, a member of the Class of 1908, is widely hailed as the first black graduate of P&S, yet long-neglected records indicate that at least four black students matriculated at the medical school starting 75 years before Johnson. Research suggests that at least one of the students completed requirements for a diploma from P&S, but school administrators were unwilling to formally recognize the accomplishment with a degree.

The P&S attendance of these four pioneers—John Brown, Washington Walter Davis, David Kearney McDonogh, and James Parker Barnett—spanned the years 1830 through 1850, establishing P&S as one of the first medical schools in America to offer courses of study in medicine to men of African heritage. Yet the progress of the four was severely hindered by the racism of their time, including a reluctance among some P&S officials to treat them on an equal footing with their classmates.

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Although scant information has been uncovered regarding Barnett (who studied at P&S between 1848 and 1850 under the aegis of the abolitionist Anti-Slavery Society and received a medical degree from Dartmouth's medical school in 1854) more is known about Brown, McDonogh, and Davis, the latter of whom attended P&S under the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society, or the ACS. The ACS, founded in 1817, directly or indirectly affected the education of all three and maintained records of their educational histories even when P&S did not.

Color and colonization

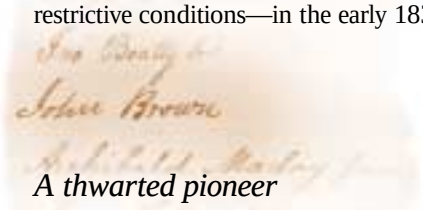
The ACS held that differences in color, culture, history, and temperament would forever prevent whites and free blacks from living harmoniously within the same political structure. While the Anti-Slavery Society, a rival organization, championed education for blacks to help them advance in America, the ACS did not have an abolitionist motive but rather saw education for blacks as a necessary step in deporting them to Liberia, a colony in Africa.

To that end, the ACS sought to train black specialists who would establish "civilization" in Liberia, even while the students regarded the training as a way to better themselves. In addition to medical personnel, these specialists included missionaries, school masters, clergymen, businessmen, and engineers.

At first, the training of black clergy and teachers was the highest priority of the ACS. But over time, the group came to realize that medical personnel were of paramount importance in view of such health issues as immunity, differences in local pathogens, the ill effects of dietary change, accidents, and the stress associated with migration.

Because blacks were not trained in medicine before 1830, white physicians constituted the medical corps for several years after the formation of Liberia in 1822. A turning point came in 1830, when Dr. Thomas Henderson, the ACS board manager and physician, recommended that whites not be encouraged to settle in Liberia because its climate seemed hazardous to their health.

In seeking medical schools that would allow ACS-endorsed black men to receive the appropriate training, the ACS found sympathizers at P&S, where John Brown studied—under restrictive conditions—in the early 1830s.



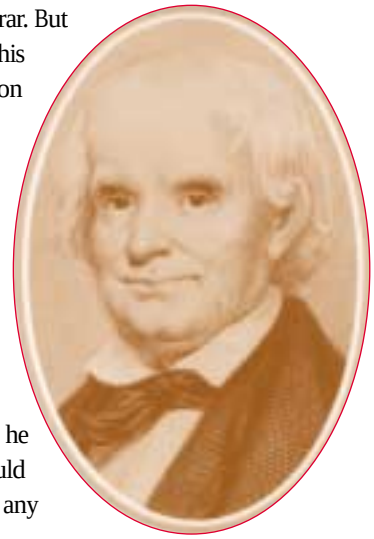
A thwarted pioneer

Born in Hartford, Conn., on Feb. 20, 1803, John Brown went to New Haven to apprentice as a shoemaker but instead became a house servant in the residence of Sarah and Nathaniel Patten. Under the tutelage of the Rev. M.P. Wells, Brown cultivated a deep interest in reading and other intellectual pursuits, earning his reputation as a discerning and well-rounded gentleman with a gift for conversation.

In 1824, Brown moved to New York City with a letter of recommendation from Nathaniel Patten. Within two years he started the study of medicine in the office of Dr. Joseph Hansen, an 1814 P&S graduate. After Hansen's death in 1828, Brown continued his medical studies under Dr. G. Van Doren, whom P&S records list as Brown's preceptor.

John Watts was president of P&S when John Brown was admitted.

Brown, who is said to have attended P&S lectures during the winters of 1828 and 1829, was formally admitted under the presidency of Dr. John Watts and was present during the sessions 1830-1831 and 1831-32 with the aid of Dr. Nicoll Dering, P&S registrar. But in 1832, when Brown declared his intent to stand for his examination for the M.D. degree, Dr. John Augustine Smith, who had recently assumed the P&S presidency, refused. As reported in an 1840 issue of the black newspaper, the Colored American, Smith's position was that "no diploma should be granted to a colored man, whatever might be his pretensions, unless he would sign a pledge that he would not avail himself of its benefit in any place but Liberia."



As president of P&S in 1932, John Augustine Smith refused to allow John Brown to stand for his examination for the M.D. degree.

Brown, who would not sign the pledge, never obtained his medical degree from P&S. But letters attesting to his qualifications as a physician and his good moral character were written on his behalf by Dr. Van Doren and Dr. William Collard Hickok, a P&S graduate. The New York free black community also honored Brown by giving him the title "Doctor." It was a common practice at that time for individuals to attend medical school courses without graduating but function as doctors.

Dr. Brown began a medical practice that lasted no longer than a year. The difficulty of sustaining a full-time practice in a poverty-stricken free black community seems to have been the primary reason he left medicine for work as a school teacher. Nevertheless, John Brown was the first professionally trained black physician in the city of New York, a credit often given to Dr. James McCune Smith.

An 1838 editorial by the Rev. Samuel E. Cornish, editor of the Colored American, lauded Dr. Brown as a crucial influence on educational achievement in the city's black community, calling him "our best mind and better calculated to be at the head of our public school education than any other individual among us. There is no man of color who possesses the confidence and respect of so large and intelligent a portion of our colored population. . . ." But even as an educator, Dr. Brown was a victim of discrimination: In his editorial, Cornish charged that although Dr. Brown effectively acted as the de facto principal of School No. 1, his salary was nearly half that of the less competent white principal.

Sensing no further advancement, Dr. Brown left the public school system in the spring of 1839 and opened a proprietary school in the basement of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. That fall, he also began traveling throughout the state, presenting science lectures under the auspices of the Phoenix Society, an anti-slavery educational organization to which he belonged. But

after his return to New York City in October, Dr. Brown ruptured a blood vessel. He died Feb. 16, 1840.

Torn between two continents

Following Dr. Brown at P&S was Washington W. Davis. Born in Virginia in 1810, Davis was the eldest child of Allen and Elsey Davis, who emigrated to Liberia with their children in 1825. In Liberia, Washington's precocity soon came to the attention of the settlement's colonial agent, Jehudi Ashmun, who recommended to the ACS board of managers that Davis be sent to America to be trained as a teacher.

Arriving in New York City in 1827, the young Davis was placed under the care of Charles C. Andrews, principal of the New York African Free School. Davis left the school after three years, then briefly worked as an agent for the ACS and the African Mission Society of Connecticut, a pro-colonization school founded by the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut to train black specialists for life in Liberia. Davis' agency involved persuading blacks—particularly those in the states of Virginia and Maryland—of the desirability of emigration to Liberia.

In May 1832, the ACS board resolved "that a letter be addressed to Dr. J.A. Smith of New York inquiring whether Washington Davis could enjoy the benefit of lectures at the College of Physicians and if so that Mr. C.C. Andrews be requested to obtain for him a situation in which he can most advantageously pursue his medical studies. . . ." Dr. Smith's prompt decision led the board to resolve two weeks later "that the thanks of this board be presented to the president and other members of the College of Physicians in New York for their liberality in consenting to afford the benefit of the lectures of the institution gratuitous to Washington Davis."

Davis appears to have regularly attended P&S in 1832 before a decision was made for his education to continue at the Columbian Medical College (now George Washington University's medical school) in Washington, D.C. Why the society wanted Davis' affiliation with P&S terminated by March 1833 is unclear, but it is known that at the time Davis attended P&S, the ACS was already supporting the medical education of three other black students at Columbian.

The ACS decision to have Davis complete his studies in Washington came at a time when the three students at Columbian were concerned about the quality of their medical education and their subsequent ability to perform medical procedures in Liberia. Two of the students threatened not to emigrate if they were not better prepared.

To avoid dragging another student into the controversy, the ACS instructed Davis to remain in New York. No longer connected with P&S, Davis resumed his studies under Dr. Edward G. Ludlow, an 1823 P&S graduate. Ludlow was doubtless paid by the ACS board, but Davis himself was no longer directly supported by the organization.

In a letter to the board dated May 12, 1835, Davis negotiated the final salary terms he would accept for returning to Liberia as an ACS physician. He made it a point to state that his goal in returning to Africa "was not for the sake of money alone; but to be useful to the people—as I have their interest at heart." While nothing in the subsequent records of the ACS indicates when Davis returned to Liberia, or where he resided there, the Liberian census of 1843 lists Washington W. Davis as a physician with a wife and a 3-year-old son. Davis also served as a Liberian legislator before his death in 1853.

Lafayette College Archives

From slavery to science

David Kearney McDonogh was born in New Orleans in August 1821. Because he was born a slave—the property of John McDonogh, who had amassed a fortune as a merchant and plantation owner—his early life and academic ascent differed significantly from those of the other black matriculants at P&S.

John McDonogh held ambivalent feelings about the "peculiar institution" of slavery. An active supporter of the ACS, he devised a scheme under which his 500 slaves could purchase their freedom if they would then emigrate to Liberia. Attempting to train a teacher and a minister among the 500, John McDonogh ran up against Louisiana laws prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to slaves. He was also denied permission to provide adequate religious training to his missionaries. To get around these restrictions, he sent two of his most talented slaves to Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., where the college president, the Rev. Dr. George Junkin, was an ardent colonizationist.

Of the two slaves who enrolled at Lafayette in 1840, Washington McDonogh was selected to follow a teacher's course of study while David McDonogh (who was not related to Washington) was to pursue a collegiate course with the expectation of becoming a minister. Washington, who completed his course in 1842, emigrated to Liberia along with his mother and 78 other former slaves of John McDonogh. But David followed another path. In 1841, he asked to add medicine to his missionary training. John McDonogh complied, granting him permission to study with Dr. Hugh H. Abernethy, a physician and pharmacist in Easton.

From the very start of his association with Abernethy, David felt that his life's work would be medicine. But upon his graduation from Lafayette in 1844, he felt profoundly discouraged. He sensed that Abernethy had grown cold to him, perhaps feeling that he had risen "above his allotted station" in obtaining a bachelor's degree. And John McDonogh's only concession to David's request to study medicine was to concede that he might complete his medical studies under one of the colony physicians in Africa. Furthermore, David was informed that no New York medical schools would accept him.

David expressed his frustration in a letter to John, writing that "the refusal on the part of the medical faculties, and the

worse than slavish treatment which I have suffered here, and from those, too, who are looked upon by their kind as saints on Earth, have given me the strongest reasons to distrust the fidelity of the white man. Therefore sir—with due deference to your honor, I have resolved to cover my sable brow with a cloud of despair and never more to look up to the white man, whatever may be his profession or condition in society, as a true friend. These concluding remarks are general and consequently liable to honorable exceptions."

P&S professor Dr. John Kearney Rodgers, Class of 1816, was such an exception, securing David McDonogh's admission to P&S lectures during the presidency of Dr. Smith's successor, Dr. Alexander H. Stevens. Although P&S officials neither listed David McDonogh in the medical school catalog during his matriculation nor formally identified him as a graduate upon the completion of his studies in 1847, it appears that, like Brown, he was fully qualified to receive a diploma and subsequently recognized as a doctor by his medical colleagues. Rodgers appointed him to a staff position at the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary. Furthermore, David McDonogh apparently referred to himself throughout his career as having received an M.D. from P&S without challenge from the school.

Alexander Stevens was president of P&S when David McDonogh was admitted.

In the early 1850s, David McDonogh married a woman named Elizabeth and opened an office at 213 Sullivan St., later relocating to 142 W. 33rd St. For a brief time, he was a member of the faculty of the Eclectic Medical College of New York. David and Elizabeth became the parents of two daughters, Christiana and Alice, and a son, John Washington, whom they apparently named in honor of his former master and his former classmate at Lafayette. But according to the census of 1870, only Alice survived to adulthood.

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE ARCHIVES

The McDonough Memorial Hospital opened in the early 1900s to honor Dr. David McDonogh, who may have changed the spelling of his name by the time he died.

Dr. David McDonogh died in New York City on Jan. 19, 1893. Five years later, the McDonough Memorial Hospital opened at 439 W. 41st St. in honor of his pioneering work. (Most records about McDonogh, including an article after his death that listed the text on his tombstone, spell his name *McDonogh*. The spelling of the hospital's name and other official records, including his will, suggest that he may have changed the spelling of his name at some point in his life.) The hospital hired staff and admitted patients regardless of race. When it closed in 1904, its director was Dr. Peter A. Johnson, who had apprenticed in medicine under McDonogh.

Spanning the centuries

And it is here that an interesting link connects 20th century black P&S graduates with their 19th century precursors. Dr. Peter Johnson—who would subsequently found the National Medical Association (an organization of African-American physicians) and serve on the first board of directors of the National Urban League—was the father of Dr. Travis J.A. Johnson, the first black P&S graduate of the 20th century.

In light of the experiences of Drs. Brown, Davis, and McDonogh, the question of whether Travis Johnson should still be considered the first black P&S graduate warrants serious consideration. From the evidence accumulated thus far, it appears that although a number of 19th century P&S administrators, professors, and alumni fully recognized the credentials of the school's first black matriculants, the administration's practice of keeping those pioneers off official records has prevented them from receiving their just due.

Professor Irvine used the Columbia Health Sciences Archives and Special Collections to research this article and consulted several other sources, including American Colonization Society records, the Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Lafayette College publications, histories of P&S and other schools, and New York Times archives. David Marc Fischer, an editorial consultant, assisted in the preparation of this article.