

Dr. John Henry Jordan: Pioneer African American Physician

Karen Jordan

“**T**he late Dr. John Henry Jordan, whose successful and brilliant career as a doctor was cut short by an untimely accident in his early forties, was a native of Troup county, having been born near Hogansville, March 11, 1870.” So records A. B. Caldwell in the 1917 Georgia edition of his *History of the American Negro and His Institutions*. Jordan may have been brilliant and successful. He was also my great-grandfather. His story provides one of the many threads that make up a largely untold tale: the contributions of African Americans to medical history in the United States.

African Americans in Medicine

African American doctors were a rare breed in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Details about the lives of this group of physicians have rarely been taught in classrooms. They describe a subject most people know very little about. Dr. James McCune Smith is known as the first African American to practice medicine in the United States. Due to discriminatory practices in the educational system at that time, however, he could not enroll at an American medical school. Therefore, he was forced to cross the Atlantic, where he earned a medical degree from the University of Glasgow in Scotland in 1837 (1). The first African American to graduate from a medical school in the United States was Dr. David J. Peck, who finished Rush Medical College in 1847 (2). It would not be until decades later that the first medical schools specifically designed to train African American doctors in the United States would open.

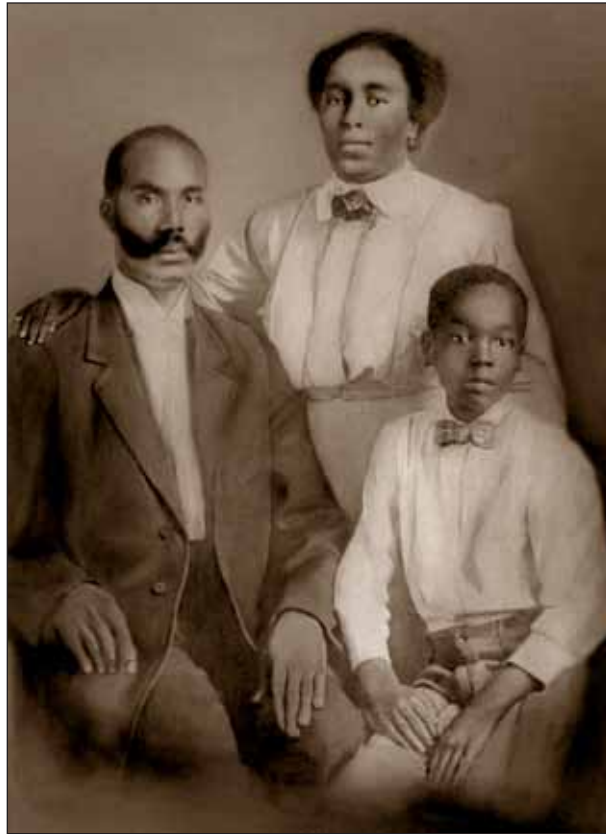
Howard University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C., and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, then known as the Meharry Medical Department at Central Tennessee College, were once considered the foremost educational institutions when it came to educating African American doctors. Howard University opened its doors in 1868 (3). Meharry began training doctors in 1876. The classes were small. The majority of the students were children of former slaves who made great sacrifices on the path to becoming medical doctors. They were a determined lot, most uncertain what the future held and whether they would be accepted in their own communities once they graduated. There were no guarantees.

At the time, African Americans embarking on medical school faced an awesome task. The needs of the population they would be expected to serve were greater than those of their white counterparts. The former slaves suffered high mortality rates in addition to being treated as second-class citizens (4). Many African American doctors themselves were treated as such during the nineteenth century, thus resulting in the formation of the National Medical Association (NMA) in 1895 (5). It was created in response to the exclusion of African American physicians from the American Medical Association (AMA) when it was formed in 1847 (6). As recently as July 2008, the AMA issued a formal apology for its past discriminatory policies.

Despite such treatment, there were notable accomplishments made by African Americans. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams became the first doctor to perform successful open heart surgery in 1893. He also opened Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses in 1891, which was the first African American owned and operated hospital in the United States (7). Dr. Charles Drew, for whom Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles is named, was considered a pioneer in blood transfusions and in developing blood banks in the early twentieth century (8).

How lonely the landscape must have been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, since African American doctors were so limited in their scope and methods of practicing. With no chance of even being considered to practice medicine at white hospitals and with few training facilities, these doctors' resources and opportunities were greatly inhibited. Still, they persisted.

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Dr. John Henry Jordan, wife Mollie (Ramsey) Jordan, and their son Edward. (Courtesy of Karen Jordan)

Trailblazer: Dr. Edward B. Ramsey

My great-great-grandfather, Dr. Edward B. Ramsey, was among them. He was in the second class of students to graduate from Meharry in 1880. Upon his graduation, Ramsey returned to his hometown of Hogansville, Georgia, to set up shop, opening up an office downtown. Though he was the first African American doctor in Troup County, Georgia, he wasn't necessarily welcomed there with open arms. It was



Newnan, Georgia, home of Dr. John Henry Jordan. Dr. Jordan and his wife, Mollie, are standing on the front porch. Their son, Edward, is sitting on the steps in front of them. Two other unidentified family members are also in the photo. The small house next door served as the first hospital for black patients in Coweta County. Mollie and John lived in the smaller house until the large, Victorian home was built in 1908. (Courtesy of Karen Jordan)

difficult in those early days for him to make a living as a doctor, so he began teaching at LaGrange Academy instead. It was a common practice at the time. Those doctors were known as “sundown doctors,” who made their primary living during daylight hours while working as physicians at night (9).

Dr. John Henry Jordan

My great-grandfather, Dr. John Henry Jordan, was also among the “sundown doctors.” He followed the same path as Ramsey, who later became his father-in-law when Jordan married Ramsey’s older daughter, Mollie Emma Ramsey. John and Mollie both attended Clark College in Atlanta, as did Ramsey. John then moved to Nashville to enroll at Meharry. He excelled in the classroom but struggled to pay his tuition. The son of a sharecropper, John had no support from his family, financial or otherwise. His father, Berry, thought the idea of a black man becoming a doctor nothing but foolishness. John’s mother had died when he was two, which probably played a role in his desire to become a doctor in the first place. With limited funds, John was forced to drop out of the medical college in his third year to work to make ends meet. He returned to school a year later, graduating in 1896 as valedictorian of his class.

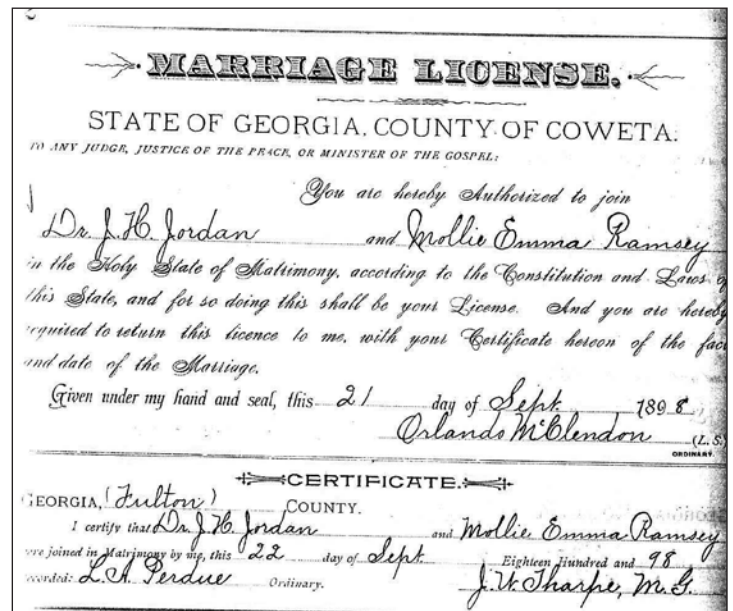
Armed with a medical degree, John returned to Hogansville, hoping to find success where Ramsey did not. By that time, Ramsey had left town to seek new opportunities as far away as Houston, Texas. Ramsey became the first black doctor to practice medicine in that city (10). In Hogansville, John faced some of the same obstacles that Ramsey had, also forcing John to resort to teaching in order to supplement his income. After two years, John set his sights on neighboring Coweta County. He moved there in 1898, becoming the county’s first black doctor. His medical practice thrived immediately.

He soon opened an office in downtown Newnan, where he saw patients when he wasn’t making house calls. John created a Medical Aid Organization for his patients to teach them about protecting themselves from various diseases and other health-related issues. Similar to many of his African American colleagues at the time, as John’s patient load increased, he unwittingly became an entrepreneur when he

opened the county’s first hospital for African American patients. He also became part owner of a general store and full owner of a saw mill. In addition, his work as a physician and surgeon afforded him the opportunity to buy land across the county for his family as well as other black people in the county. He was known to purchase the land and allow black residents to rent it from him, encouraging them to ultimately own the land themselves. As John’s medical practice and fame grew throughout the area, white families also began seeking him out for medical care. The impetus was when he saved the life of a child from a wealthy white family. John was reportedly able to dislodge a marble from the child’s throat after the case had stumped several white doctors who were initially called upon to help.

The one regret he seemed to have was the death of his and Mollie’s firstborn son, Johnny Clementine. The baby was just a few weeks old when he died, and it was said that John grieved the fact he could save the lives of so many of his patients but not that of his own son. A little more than a year later, however, he was given a second chance when he and Mollie had a second son. They named him Edward after Mollie’s father. Mollie, who was a music major in college, doted on their only son. John made sure they both had the best of everything. Mollie was known to order china patterns from Europe. John also gave her a piano, which she coveted, often playing hymns that could be heard at the Methodist church they attended. She ordered sheet music featuring countless popular tunes from the early 1900s. Mollie was also an avid cook, collecting newspaper clippings of some of her favorite recipes, which she compiled in a scrapbook along with articles about some of her favorite black singers, poets, and politicians of that time period. Edward loved music as well, but his father forbade him to play the piano. John did not consider it a manly thing to do at the time. His sights were set on Edward becoming a doctor like he was. He sometimes allowed Edward to assist him with patients, even allowing his son to drip ether, that day’s form of anesthesia, as preparation for surgery.

John was making plans to build the first black library in the area when tragedy struck. While driving to a house call on Saturday night, 14 September 1912, John’s car stopped. As he stepped out of his vehicle to check the car’s gas tank, a passerby lit a match thus igniting fumes



Marriage license of Dr. John Henry Jordan and Mollie Emma Ramsey. They were married September 21, 1898, the year in which John relocated to Coweta County. (Courtesy of Karen Jordan)

Saturday night Dr. J. H. Jordan, the well-known colored physician, was filling his automobile tank with gasoline, and in order to see better during the process and prevent the tank from overflowing, he called to a negro boy standing close by to strike a match. As the match flared up the fumes from the gasoline became ignited, causing the tank to explode. In an instant Dr. Jordan was enveloped by the flames, and was so severely burned that he died Sunday night from the injuries received. Deceased was one of Newnan's worthiest and most enterprising colored citizens, who had done much for the advancement and elevation of his race, and his death is regretted by all classes.

Obituary for Dr. John Henry Jordan, *Newnan (Georgia) Herald*, September 20, 1912.

from the gasoline, causing an explosion. John was fatally burned and died the following night at the age of forty-two. In addition to his wife, Mollie, and then twelve-year-old son, Edward, John left behind a host of brothers, sisters, and a father to mourn his death.

My grandfather Edward, a kind, genteel man, never spoke of the tragedy to me. His father was immensely important to him. My grandfather spent his early twenties fighting to save the house his father built and loved, determined to preserve his father's legacy. While his efforts were successful, he never achieved his father's dream that his son would become a doctor. Out of Edward's three sons, however, one of them, Harold, became the fulfillment of the dream. My father, Harold Jordan, graduated from Meharry Medical College more than sixty-five years after John Henry Jordan did, and is still practicing medicine today.

Endnotes

1. Thomas M. Morgan, M.D., "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 Association*, (July 2003): 603.
2. *History of Rush Medical College*, Rush University Medical Center Archives, April 2005. <http://www.rushu.rush.edu/servlet/Satellite?MetaAttrName=meta_university&ParentId=1142960797000&ParentType=RushUnivLevel1Page&c=content_block&cid=1143661513008&level1p=1&pagename=Rush%2Fcontent_block%2FContentBlockDetail>.
3. Sterling M. Lloyd, Jr., "A Short History of the Howard University College of Medicine," Howard University College of Medicine (May 2006), <<http://medicine.howard.edu/about/history/default.htm>>. See also Rayford Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 17-68.
4. James Summerville, *Educating Black Doctors: A History of Meharry Medical College* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1983), 12.
5. Morgan, M.D., "The Education and Medical Practice of Dr. James McCune Smith," 603. For NMA history, see <http://www.nmanet.org/index.php/nma_sub/history>.
6. Robert B. Baker et al., "African American Physicians and Organized Medicine, 1846-1968: Origins of a Racial Divide," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 300 (July 16, 2008): 309.
7. *History: Provident Hospital*, The Provident Foundation, Chicago, IL. <<http://www.providentfoundation.org/history/index.html>>.
8. "Dr. Charles Drew," Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science,

<<http://www.cdrewu.edu/about-cdu/dr-charles-drew>>. On Drew, see also Spencie Love, *One Blood: The Death and Resurrection of Charles R. Drew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

9. "Sundown Doctors and Evening Colleges," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 24 (January 26, 1895): 140; George Frederick Shrady, A.M., M.D., "News of the Week," *Medical Record: A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, 47 (January 12, 1895): 53.
10. University of Houston, Center for Public History, "To Bear Fruit for Our Race," <http://www.history.uh.edu/cph/tobearfruit/story_1900-1926.html>; see also Walter Moursund, M.D., L.L.D., *African American Physicians-Houston, Texas, 1884-1956*, ed. Mildred Moursund Essig (Houston, Tex.: 1958).

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