

Black History Month: William F. Garnett, DDS

William F. Garnett, DDS, 1863-1925

By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant

William Fielding Garnett was born around 1863 in Chicago. His parents, Daniel—who worked as a shoemaker—and Hannah, were free people of color from Kentucky who had moved to Chicago shortly before William's birth. [His sister Isabella](#) was born about 10 years later; she would go on to earn an MD, marry a [graduate of Northwestern University Medical School](#), and become a prominent figure in Evanston's Black community. The family eventually settled in Evanston, becoming some of the earliest Black residents of the city.¹ Through his 20s Garnett worked as a waiter at the Avenue House, one of Evanston's first hotels, located at Davis Street and Chicago Avenue; he became head waiter by 1888.

In 1890, Garnett enrolled at Northwestern University Dental School and earned his DDS in 1892, making him the first Black graduate of the school.² A family story tells that he received a perfect score on his final exam and the faculty, not believing he did this on his own, called him in to retake the exam. Because he had a photographic memory, he was able to duplicate his answers and was awarded his degree. This taught him to be sure that his accomplishments could never be challenged. Demonstrating the respect he had earned at the school, Garnett was given the distinction of speaking on behalf of his class at a banquet following the commencement ceremony.



Portrait of Garnett in later life. (via [Find a Grave](#))

Garnett's career as a dentist lasted for over 30 years. He worked in Chicago for about 5 years before moving his practice to Evanston. From 1903 to 1925, his office was located at 1615 Benson Avenue; he shared this space with his sister Isabella Garnett Butler, MD, for a time. A [1919 profile of Garnett](#) in *The Broad Ax*, a Chicago-based Black newspaper, described him as a "popular and progressive dentist...who numbers some of [Evanston's] best white citizens among his customers" and who "stands higher in the estimation of the solid businessmen [in Evanston] and along the North Shore than any other Colored man in that section of this state."

In addition to his successful dental practice, Garnett played a large role in the Black community of Evanston. In the early 1900s he was president of the Colored Young Men's Club of Evanston, which had been created to give young Black men an alternative to the Evanston YMCA which was white-only at the time. Later, he was instrumental in the creation of the Emerson Street Branch of the YMCA, which opened in 1914 and was intended for the use of Evanston's growing Black population. Garnett also served as president of Evanston's chapter of the Negro Business League, an organization founded by Booker T. Washington to promote the interests of Black-owned businesses, and he was a charter member of the Evanston branch of the NAACP.

Garnett died on December 8, 1925, collapsing shortly after addressing a political meeting in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago, where his sister Isabella was in attendance. His death made the front page of the *Chicago Defender*, the city's leading Black newspaper, reflecting his importance in the city and beyond.

Special thanks to Rhonda Craven, Historian at the Second Baptist Church of Evanston, who compiled much of the information about Garnett's life. Her work—and her generosity in sharing it—made this article possible.



Dining room of the Avenue House hotel, where Garnett worked in the 1880s. (via [Evanston History Center Facebook page](#))

Endnotes

1. Shorefront Legacy Center. "[Evanston: An Early North Shore African American Community.](#)" *Shorefront Journal*. April 1, 2013.

2. William Thomas Jefferson, DDS, earned his degree from the American College of Dental Surgery in 1891, the year before Garnett received his DDS. Northwestern University Dental School purchased and absorbed ACDS in 1895, retroactively making all of its graduates Northwestern graduates. Thus, Garnett was the first Black dental graduate who attended Northwestern proper, but Jefferson is retroactively the first Black graduate of the school.

Selected References

"Doctor W. F. Garnett Stands High in the Estimation of the Best People of Evanston Ill. and along the North Shore." *The Broad Ax*. May 31, 1919.

"Dr. Garnett Drops Dead after Making Political Speech." *The Chicago Defender*. December 12, 1925.

Printed: Tuesday, June 25, 2024 4:50 AM

Source: <https://galter.northwestern.edu/News/black-history-month-william-f-garnett.pdf>