

Celebrating Black History: Theodore K. Lawless, MD



This week we are featuring Theodore Kenneth Lawless, MD, MS, DSc, LLD, who earned MD and MS degrees from and taught at Northwestern University Medical School. Dr. Lawless (1892-1971) was a renowned African American dermatologist, businessman, and philanthropist.

By: Katie Lattal, Special Collections Librarian. First published 2020, expanded in 2021.

Theodore Lawless grew up in New Orleans, earned his AB at Talladega College, and went on to study medicine at the University of Kansas. He completed his MD at Northwestern in 1919 and also earned an MS in 1920. After studying dermatology at prestigious institutions in New York, Boston, Paris, and Vienna, Lawless returned to Chicago in 1924. He was one of the first faculty members to receive an Elizabeth Ward research fellowship at Northwestern, which allowed him to focus on finding a cure for leprosy and advancing treatments for leprosy, skin conditions, and syphilis. As part of this fellowship, he set up one of the first clinical laboratories in the Ward Memorial Building, Northwestern's new state-of-the-art health sciences building. He researched and taught dermatology at Northwestern until 1941 when he left the university to focus on his practice, a decision likely influenced by his colleagues' prejudicial treatment of him and the administration's seeming unwillingness to promote him.

Once out of the academic world, Lawless concentrated his energies on treating patients and investing his wealth. He had many business interests in Chicago, holding leadership positions at several banks and corporations. As Lawless' wealth grew, so did his philanthropy. Believing that black students in the South were more disadvantaged than those in the North, he donated funds toward educational institutions across the southern United States—though he did not overlook Chicago and contributed support to youth organizations in the city. He also directed his philanthropy to Jewish institutions in the United States and Israel because as a young physician he had received help, advice, and camaraderie from peers of Jewish heritage.

Lawless was an active member of the professional medical community. He became a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and Syphilology in 1935, and he was the first African American to serve on Chicago's Board of Health. He also served on the Prison Welfare Commission and the National Advisory Committee of the Selective Service. Lawless received five honorary degrees and earned many awards for his philanthropy and work in medicine and business, most notably winning the Springarn Medal, the NAACP's highest honor, in 1954.



His portrait (at right) hangs in the Baldwin Auditorium of the Robert H. Lurie Medical Research Center. The National Portrait Gallery holds a portrait of Dr. Lawless in their collection.

Learn more:

[Newsreel highlighting Theodore K. Lawless in the lab at Provident Hospital](#)

Cobb WM. [Theodore Kenneth Lawless, M.D., M.S., D.Sc., LL.D., 1892](#). J Natl Med Assoc. 1970 Jul;62(4):310-2. PMID: 4912546; PMCID: PMC2611773.

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