

Celebrating African-American Graduates of the Medical School

By: Ron Sims, Special Collections Librarian (now retired)



As one of the founders of Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses in 1891, the first inter-racial institution of its type in Chicago, **Daniel Hale Williams** provided numerous opportunities for all of Chicago's black medical students to further their medical studies through internships at Provident.

Dr. Williams began his studies at the medical school in 1881, following an apprenticeship with Dr. Henry Palmer in Janesville, Wisconsin. In 1883 he was awarded an MD and established a private practice in Chicago. From 1885 to 1888 he was Demonstrator in Anatomy at Northwestern followed by an appointment as Instructor at the South Side Dispensary (the free clinic of Northwestern). He was appointed to the Illinois State Board of Health in 1887 and at the same time became the attending physician at the Protestant Orphan Asylum. In 1892 he provided a "Certificate of Character" for the admission of Emma Reynolds to Northwestern University Woman's Medical School. She was a graduate of the Training School for Nurses at Provident Hospital and went on to become the first black woman to be awarded an MD at Northwestern in 1895.

On July 10, 1893, Dr. Williams performed one of the first successful operations of the pericardium and President Grover Cleveland appointed him Surgeon-in-Chief at Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. that same year. In 1895 he was one of the founders of the National Medical Association before returning to Chicago in 1898 to become Surgeon at Provident Hospital. He taught surgical clinics at Meharry Medical College, Nashville, Tennessee beginning in 1900 and was later appointed as Professor of Clinical Surgery. In 1909 he was appointed to the surgical staff at Cook County Hospital, Chicago, a position he held through 1926. Elected Fellow of the American College of Surgeons in 1913, he was the only black surgeon among the initiates until 1934. After completing his career on the surgical staff at St. Luke's Hospital, Chicago, he retired to Idlewild, Michigan and died in 1931.

Allen Alexander Wesley, another founder of Provident Hospital was in the medical school class of 1887. He was born in Dublin, Indiana in 1856, attended Cincinnati public schools, and then business school in Chicago. In 1870, he returned to Cincinnati and began studying medicine with Dr. William Mussey. He matriculated at Northwestern in 1874 and completed the three year program. In 1885 he was appointed Clinical Assistant to Dr. Walter Hay in the Department of Mental and Nervous Diseases at Northwestern and in 1886, clinical assistant in the Department of Surgery under Dr. Ralph Nelson Isham. He later became a lecturer on "surgical emergencies" at the Provident Training School, then district physician for Cook County Hospital. Returning full time to Provident, he was gynecologist, Surgeon-in-Charge (1894) and secretary to the medical staff, and later Chief Surgeon (1895).



In May 1898, at the age of 41, he volunteered to examine recruits for the black 8th and white 9th Illinois Regiments, enrolling in the 8th Regiment himself. On July 2 he was commissioned a major in the 8th Illinois Regiment. The 8th Illinois was then mustered to Cuba where he was appointed Acting Brigade Surgeon and was placed in charge of the post hospital at San Luis, becoming the medical officer in charge of the medical care of the 8th Illinois, 9th Louisiana and 23rd Kansas Infantry Regiments, in addition to two Pack Trains and a Signal Corps. He commanded 40 members of the hospital corps.

On October 27, he was appointed to a medical board of three physicians to examine all of the medical officers to appear before the board in Santiago, the first African American to hold that position in the U.S. Army. After the Spanish-American War, he was mustered out, after which he returned to Chicago and private practice. He died in 1929.



Austin Maurice Curtis, a native of Raleigh, North Carolina and graduate of Lincoln University in 1888, was a member of Northwestern's medical school class of 1891. As a protégé of Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, Dr. Curtis was chosen to be the first intern at the newly-founded Provident Hospital. Following his internship he was appointed visiting surgeon on Provident's staff and also opened a private practice in Chicago.

On January 6, 1896, he was appointed to the surgical staff at Cook County Hospital, the first African-American to hold such a post. In 1898, his growing reputation led to his appointment as Surgeon-in-Chief at Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C., succeeding his mentor and friend, Dr. Williams who then returned to Chicago.

Dr. Curtis was held in high regard by his students for his teaching skills at the bedside and in the operating room. He held the Freedman post until 1902, at which time he entered private practice in Washington. He also took up a teaching post at Howard University, ultimately being named Professor in the Department of Surgery. A Curtis aphorism spoken by many at Howard was "diagnosis must depend upon the preponderance of symptoms." He retired in 1938 and died the following year.

Through the actions of men and women such as Drs. Williams, Wesley, Curtis, and Reynolds, many doors were opened so that others could follow in their footsteps.