**Serving the Poorest of the Poor: Black Medical Practitioners in the Arkansas Delta, 1880-1960**

C. Calvin Smith

"They were on call twenty four hours per day, seven days per week. It was never too early or too late, too hot or too cold. If their transportation gave out, their shoes were not too expensive to be covered with gumbo mud, and their noses were never turned up at a patient."

This recollection aptly describes the vast majority of black health care professionals—physicians and dentists—who labored to service the medical and, in some cases, educational needs of the black community in the Mississippi Delta region of eastern Arkansas from the late 1870s to the early 1960s.

The history of black medical care in the Arkansas delta began with the herbal practice of Dr. Patience Brooks Trotter. She was born in Monticello (Drew County) in 1843 to Curl and Lynn Brooks and was a member of a black family that later became prominent in Arkansas Reconstruction politics. Reported a number of white doctors in Monticello sent their female patients to Trotter after their own treatments proved unsuccessful. One of those physicians, Dr. W. F. Bessellieu, frequently referred his

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1Precious Few interview by author, November 14, 1996, Marianna, Arkansas. Few is a retired public school teacher who has spent his entire life in Marianna, the county seat of Lee County, Arkansas.


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imprinted by the hand of nature on the two races [made it obvious] that the same medical treatment which would benefit or cure a white man, would often kill a Negro.\textsuperscript{6} During the colonial period and thereafter, white physicians created a lexicon of so-called Negro diseases: cachexia africana (dirt eating), struma africana (the negro consumption), and drapetomania (the disease which caused slaves to run away). These diagnoses were not based upon any scientific findings, but they subjected blacks to unnecessary surgery and other experimental medicine throughout much of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{7}

The Civil War prompted the first noticeable improvement in black health care delivery systems, primarily by encouraging the development of a community of practitioners who did not share white doctors’ prejudices. During the war thousands of black soldiers died of wounds from which white soldiers recovered, because the War Department rarely assigned enough competent doctors to black units. Most of the white doctors who treated wounded or sick black soldiers suffered from “moral astigmatism.” This was revealed in the conditions of Union army hospitals for blacks in Arkansas. At Fort Smith’s military hospital for blacks, 92 of 343 patients died or did not recover from minor wounds. At Pine Bluff black soldiers often died from minor wounds, unsanitary conditions, dysentery, typhoid fever, and measles. A white Union army medical inspector described the black military hospital in Helena as “the dirtiest place inside and the filthiest place outside that was . . . my lot to inspect.”\textsuperscript{8} Alarmed by the high death rate of black soldiers during the war and the widespread poverty and sickness which afflicted the black community in the war’s aftermath, leading black citizens and white philanthropists, with some support from Congress, began establishing medical schools to train black medical professionals.

Between 1869 and 1907, eleven medical schools, most of which were in the South, were established for the training of black doctors and dentists. By 1910 all but two of these institutions had been forced to close because the influential Flexner Report on medical education described their training


\textsuperscript{7}Thomas L. Livermore, \textit{Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861–1865} (1901; reprint, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1957), 75–76, 140–145.

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., 115


programs as ineffective. Only the Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C., established in 1869, and the Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, established in 1876, were able to withstand the scathing criticism of the report. Both institutions had by that time established dental schools, and between them they produced the great majority of black physicians and dentists who served southern black communities between 1870 and 1960.

While black medical schools and their graduates were struggling to get established and earn respectability during the late nineteenth century, their white counterparts had already achieved those goals. By 1847, when the American Medical Association (AMA) was founded, white medical societies had been established throughout the nation. With the support of the AMA, white medical societies across the South barred blacks from membership. This exclusion denied black doctors and dentists the opportunity to share ideas and learn about new medical developments that membership in established professional societies offered.

Black medical professionals soon organized their own medical societies. In 1870 the faculty of the Howard University Medical School called a meeting and organized the Medical Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, a medical society which would "grant equal rights and privileges to regular [medical] practitioners." Within a few years similar organizations were formed throughout the nation, and in 1884 representatives of these groups united under the banner of the National Medical Association (NAM).

Dr. Arthur M. Townsend, a Nashville, Tennessee, pathologist and Meharry graduate, best suggested the motivation of black health care professionals when he said, "Where our people carry out the principles of employing Negro doctors, the statistics filed in the office of the (Tennessee) Health Department show that the mortality rate in such communities is far less than where other conditions obtain." Many of these dedicated doctors and dentists, furthermore, became educational and political leaders in the communities they served. They faced numerous problems, however. In many cases they could not provide their patients with the best medical care because the AMA, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, the American Association of Medical Colleges, the American Hospital Association, and numerous other white medical organizations denied blacks membership. This exclusion not only denied blacks access to the latest medical equipment and medical knowledge, it also denied them the right to practice their profession in the nation's public and private hospitals, because those institutions only allowed doctors who were members of the local white medical societies to practice within their walls. Black medical professionals also had to fight to overcome distrust in the black communities they served. Many blacks had been led to believe that black doctors were poorly trained and could not be trusted to provide the same quality of care as that provided by white physicians.

Although the odds were against them, graduates of the black medical schools who settled in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas were determined to practice their profession and earn the respect of their people and that of the larger community. Some of these doctors were native Arkansans. Others of this first generation of black doctors had migrated to the state, perhaps drawn by the writings of Bishop Henry M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), who portrayed Arkansas as some kind of "promised land" for blacks during the post-Reconstruction era. In 1889 Turner wrote: "Arkansas is destined to be a great Negro state of the country. . . . The meager prejudice compared to some states, and opportunity to acquire wealth, all conspire to make it inviting for colored men who wish to live by their merits." Although black health-care professionals practiced throughout Arkansas, the greatest number of them settled in the delta regions of eastern and northeast Arkansas, which included, among others, the counties of Mississippi, Crittenden, Jackson, Craighead, St. Francis, Lee, and Phillips.

Nearly all of the black health care professionals who served Mississippi County between 1870 and 1960 were graduates of the Meharry Medical

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School. Most of them, however, failed to reap the rewards promised by Bishop Turner and left the delta for more lucrative areas. But those who stayed made a noticeable impact on the communities they served. Three who established successful practices in Mississippi County were Theo Keith, D.D.S., Benjamin Roberts, M.D., and King Henry Nunn, D.D.S.

Between 1921 and 1949, Keith, a South Carolina native, was the only black dentist serving Blytheville's black community. In 1949 his workload was lightened when Dr. King Henry Nunn III set up his practice. Nunn was a native of Mississippi County and was educated in the black public school at Tucker. He graduated in 1935 from AM&N College (now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff). He taught science and coached basketball for several years in the black public schools of Mississippi County. In 1945 he was encouraged by his friend and mentor, Dr. Keith, to fulfill a dream and enter dental school. He was accepted at Meharry. Aided by his wife, Helen, who worked as a public school teacher to help him pay tuition, Nunn graduated in 1949. After his graduation, he returned to Blytheville and opened his dental practice. He struggled in the early years but eventually established a financially rewarding practice.16

These men were not only dedicated health care professionals, but also, along with their wives, leaders in the black community. In the mid-1920s Dr. Roberts initiated a successful financial drive which led to the purchase of land for the establishment of the first black public school in Blytheville. His efforts in this endeavor reflected his personal motto: "Do not look for what you can get, but to what you can give to improve the community."17 Roberts’s wife Lenette, was also active in serving the needs of the black community. She opened and operated the first nursery school in Blytheville for black working mothers, most of whom were employed as day laborers on nearby plantations; she even fed their children in her own home.18

Dr. Keith and his wife, Velda, were also interested in the education of Mississippi County’s black population. They adopted several Mississippi

County youths and sent them to college at their own expense.19 Because of the service of the Keiths to Blytheville’s black community, streets in the city were named for them after their deaths.20

Like their predecessors in Blytheville and Mississippi County, Dr. Nunn and his wife, Helen, became educational leaders in the community. He was one of the leaders in the successful movement to establish the Mississippi County Community College in Blytheville (MCCC) in 1974. This institution made two years of college available for those who could not afford to move away and attend four-year institutions. Nunn served on MCCC Board of directors from 1974 until his death in 1981.21 In addition to his work with the MCCC, he bought and remodeled housing for low-income families in Blytheville, sponsored free health clinics, and made his office available to students enrolled in the Cooperative Educational Program at Blytheville High School.22 In 1979, Nunn’s service to his community was recognized when the Arkansas Community Development Program awarded him with its Award for Exceptional Accomplishments.23 Nunn was ably assisted by his wife, who earned an M.S. (1954) and a Ph.D. (1966) in Home Economics from Cornell University. Upon completing her doctorate, Mrs. Nunn established the first Neighborhood Services Center in Mississippi County. The center provided job training services, employment opportunities, and health and nutritional information for the poor. While working to improve the quality of life for blacks in Mississippi County, she was hired by the University of Memphis home economics department and went on to become the institution’s first black tenured professor.24

The Medical Registry for Crittenden County, which bordered Mississippi County and included the cities of Earle, West Memphis, Marion (the county seat), and several other small communities indicates that several

16 Alena E. Wiese et al, Blytheville/Mississippi County Black Culture, Sesquicentennial Scrapbook (Blytheville, Arkansas, 1986), 40. This publication was produced by the black community in Blytheville for the sesquicentennial celebration. A copy of this booklet is in the Blytheville Public Library.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.
black doctors practiced in the area between 1880 and 1960. George W. S. Ish, (M.D., Harvard, 1909), one of the few black health care professionals in the Arkansas delta who did not graduate from the Meharry or Howard medical schools, was licensed to practice medicine in the area in May of 1919. According to Curtis Hearn of Marion, who was Dr. Ish’s neighbor, the doctor was well respected by both blacks and whites in Crittenden County but found it difficult to earn a living from his practice because of the inability of his black patients to pay cash for his services. This was a problem that confronted the majority of black health care professionals in the Arkansas delta.

Unlike Crittenden County, Newport in Jackson County, had a rather large cadre of black health professionals for its size. The history of black health care professionals in the county dates back to the late nineteenth century. The Jackson County Registry of Physicians shows that a black, Dr. Henry McGrath, was practicing medicine in and around Newport (the county seat) as early as 1871. The Registry, however, does not list the medical school where McGrath received his training. In addition to McGrath, four dentists and six physicians practiced medicine in the county between 1881 and 1960. The dentists, all Meharry graduates, had offices in Newport, but served the black community throughout Jackson County. Some of them, like their counterparts in other black communities in the Arkansas delta, were active educational leaders. Dr. Frank C. Goodwin, for example, who moved his practice to Newport from Little Rock in 1913, became involved in the education of black youths in the city and served as president of the Newport Parent Teacher Association from 1934 to 1937.

The eight black physicians who practiced in Jackson County in the early twentieth century were also Meharry graduates. As was true of black doctors in other delta counties, several of these physicians were unable to make a living in Jackson County and left after a few years. Dr. Frank E. Christophe, on the other hand, moved to Newport in 1907 from Woodruff County and practiced medicine in the city until his death in 1949.

Preceding Dr. Christophe in the practice of medicine in Newport was Dr. Bryson E. Henderson, a “well educated and very intelligent man,” who began his public service career as a school teacher in the Weldon community of Jackson County. Not only was Henderson a physician and educator, he was also an active businessman. He owned and operated a drugstore and soda fountain in Newport. Perhaps his business venture supplemented the meager income he received from the practice of medicine and allowed him to keep his doors open. In 1901 Henderson was elected the Newport delegate to the State Convention of the Negro Business League, which was affiliated with the National Negro Business League founded by Booker T. Washington. Where Henderson received his medical training is unclear, but he was well respected in both the black and white communities of Newport. An interracial group numbering more than five hundred attended his funeral in 1904. The pallbearers were white and the musicians came from his local black church.

Perhaps the physician with the longest tenure in Newport was Dr. William B. Black, who practiced from 1927 to 1960. He was native of Newport and the son of Pickens Black, the largest and wealthiest black landowner in Jackson County. Black was a graduate of the black public school in Newport, Philander Smith College in Little Rock, and the Meharry Medical College (1917). He spent the first ten years of his career in Little Rock before moving to Newport in 1927, where he practiced until his death. During his career in Newport, Black built a respected and successful practice and became the first black accepted into the membership of the heretofore all-white Jackson County Medical Society. But, according to his widow, his practice was not financially rewarding because of the poverty of

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23Medical Registry of Crittenden County, County Court House, Marion, Arkansas. Blacks are identified by a small “c,” for colored, by their names.
24Curtis Hearn, interview by author, August 26, 1993, Marion, Arkansas. Hearn is a lifelong resident of Crittenden County and was the first black employee of the Arkansas Power and Light Company in the county.
25Registry of Physicians, Jackson County Court House, Newport, Arkansas.
28Mays, “Black Community Prosper With City,” Records of the Probate Clerk, Jackson County Court House, Newport, Arkansas; James L. Morgan, interview by author, August 7, 1993, Newport, Arkansas. Morgan, a lifelong resident of Jackson County, was able to direct the author to several sources of black history in the city.
29Newport Daily Independent, August 24, 1904; Morgan interview.
30Willa B. Black, widow of Dr. W. B. Black, interview by author, August 3, 1993, Newport, Arkansas.
his clients. She also said that her husband treated many patients for no charge as a way of giving back to the community, which had given him and his father so much.33

The Registry of Physicians and Surgeons for St. Francis County, which included Forrest City (the county seat) and the smaller communities of Hughes, Widener, Madison, and several others, lists four dentists and four physicians who practiced in the county between 1900 and 1960. Of the dentists, only Drs. John E. Burke and Earl C. Clay established long-term practices. Both were graduates of the Meharry Dental School. Burke was a Texan who came to Arkansas and attended Philander Smith College in Little Rock. After graduating from Philander, he matriculated at Meharry, graduated in 1918 and hung his shingle in Forrest City that same year.34 Before he could firmly establish his practice, however, he was drafted into the army where he served in the Dental Corps as a second lieutenant until he was mustered out in 1919.35 After leaving the military, Burke returned to Forrest City, built a successful practice, and became a noted local businessman. In 1923 he went into the mortuary business with H. L. Williams, the brother of his wife, Thelma. Williams was the first licensed black graduate embalmer in St. Francis County. Following Williams's death in 1935, Burke and his wife continued to operate the mortuary as the H. L. Williams Undertaking Company. In 1951 the business was turned over to their only son, J. E. Burke Jr., who operated it as Burke's Mortuary.36

While practicing in Forrest City, Dr. Burke continued to improve his dental skills by doing graduate work at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the University of California at Berkeley, the Chicago Dental School (Northwestern University), and the McKesson School of Anesthesia in Toledo, Ohio. He also expanded his business interests through the purchase of property in the nearby communities of Madison and Palestine. In Madison he owned a farm and in Palestine, he built a lucrative cattle business. Burke still found time to play an active role in his church and in local community affairs. He served as a deacon and as president of the choir in his local church, and as president of the St. Francis County Non-Partisan Voters League, an organization dedicated to the election of public officials who responded to the needs of the black community.37 Local residents who knew Burke described him as a “genuinely good person, who was always friendly and helpful.”38

Dr. Earl C. Clay, the other black dentist who left a record in Forrest City and St. Francis County, was not as friendly and outgoing as Dr. Burke. Like Burke, Clay migrated to Forrest City after finishing dental school. He was born in Mississippi, educated at Rusk College in that state, and graduated from Meharry in 1922. Following his graduation from Meharry, Clay and his wife, Grace, a licensed pharmacist and a 1921 graduate of the Meharry School of Pharmacy, moved to St. Francis County because of its large black population, which they believed promised a lucrative future.39 What they did not know was that the great majority of that population were poor sharecroppers who could not afford to pay cash for medical services. Although disappointed with what they found in St. Francis County, the Clays settled in Forrest City where he was able to build a modest practice. Perhaps because of their disappointment, the Clays were not active in local social and civic affairs. One local resident who knew Clay said that "he was different from the other black doctors. He spent a great deal of time in Memphis, Tennessee [approximately forty miles away], refused to treat patients in his home like the other doctors, and generally kept to himself."40

In addition to the small group of black dentists who practiced in Forrest City and St. Francis County, Polk’s Arkansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory (1913) identifies several black physicians who served the area. Of these only Dr. Spriggs Benton Banks practiced medicine there for an extended period of time (1925–1965). Banks, like many of the black healthcare professionals in the Arkansas delta, was an immigrant. He was born in Lake Providence, Louisiana, where he received his primary education in a private school operated by white Catholic missionaries, who recognized his

31Ibid.
34Polk, Arkansas State Gazetteer, vol. 6; Registry of Physicians and Surgeons, St. Francis County, County Court House, Forrest City, Arkansas.
36Ibid.
academic potential and encouraged him to continue his education. Since there was no high school for blacks in Lake Providence, Banks traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, and enrolled in Weldon High School, a private institution operated by whites. Like his Catholic primary teachers, the staff at Weldon recognized his potential and encouraged him to pursue a college education.

In his senior year at Weldon, Banks applied to and was accepted for medical study at Meharry. The decision to attend Meharry was one with which the young Banks struggled. He had been forced to work to pay his way through Weldon and feared that he would be unable to afford medical school. Once he made the decision to attend Meharry, however, he was determined to succeed. Banks enjoyed the intellectual challenge of medical school, but he struggled financially. To pay tuition, he washed lunch and dinner dishes for a local white family, cut the firewood they used for cooking, and hauled the coal they used for heating. He was able to balance work and study and graduated from Meharry in 1910 with a specialty in gynecology and obstetrics.

Like many black doctors during the period, Banks was drawn to the Arkansas delta by reports of the large black population there. He decided to settle in Forrest City, believing the area offered the best financial prospects. He would be disappointed in this expectation, however. As so many delta doctors found, rural patients rarely had much money on hand with which to pay medical fees. According to Banks's widow, her husband treated many of his patients on credit and was forced to wait until crops were harvested and sold before receiving payment. She recalled occasions when patients, most of whom were sharecroppers on nearby plantations, received no cash settlement for their crops and offered to pay their debts with livestock and farm produce. Such situations forced Banks to borrow money from local banks and even rely on his wife's salary as a school teacher, not only to cover personal expenses but to purchase medical supplies.

Yet it was not the mere fact that his clientele was composed largely of poor sharecroppers that caused Banks hardship, but also the fact that they were sharecroppers on plantations whose owners preferred to do business with white doctors when it came to securing care for their tenants. Banks's dilemma was shared by many black professionals in the delta. Jim Crow laws and social taboos limited them to serving a black clientele but did not afford them a monopoly over service to even that largely impoverished sector of the community. The majority of delta blacks lived on plantations, and plantation owners often contracted with white physicians to treat their tenants. Record books for the Judd Hill plantation in Poinsett County, for instance, contain numerous entries showing that tenants had visited white doctors and had the fee charged to their plantation account.

Not all black doctors and dentists struggled financially, however. At least until the onset of the Great Depression, the career of Lee County's Joseph H. Barabin offers a striking contrast to that of Dr. Banks. The Registry of Physicians and Surgeons for Lee County lists two dentists and seven physicians licensed to practice in the area between 1900 and 1960, but Barabin, a 1905 graduate of the Illinois Medical College, was surely the most notable. So successful and respected was Barabin that G. P. Hamilton, in his study of black leaders after the turn of the century, included him as one of the "Beacon Lights of the Race." Barabin was born in Louisiana in 1874 and introduced to education by a former Union Army soldier whose "intellectual storehouse was sadly in need of mental pabulum." This crude introduction to formal education whetted Barabin's appetite for learning, but there were no public high schools for blacks in Iberia Parish, where he lived. Finally, in 1890 he said goodbye to family and friends and headed for Gilbert Academy in Baldwin, Louisiana, about twenty miles away. He worked and paid his own way through Gilbert and graduated in 1895. From Gilbert, Barabin headed for Nashville, Tennessee, where he entered Fisk University. At Fisk he was a biology student, a star on the football and debate teams, and reportedly one of the most popular men on campus. Barabin did not, however, allow his popularity to interfere with his pursuit of learning, and he graduated from Fisk with honors in 1900.

\[^{44}\text{Judd Hill Plantation Collection, Dean B. Ellis Library, Arkansas State University.}\]
\[^{46}\text{G. P. Hamilton, Beacon Lights of the Race (Memphis, TN: E. H. Clarke & Brothers, 1911), 325.}\]
\[^{47}\text{Ibid., 325.}\]
\[^{48}\text{Ibid., 327.}\]
The five years Barabin spent at Fisk increased his desire to learn, and he decided to study medicine both for its intellectual challenge and economic and social possibilities. In 1900 he applied to and was accepted as a student by the Illinois Medical College (later Northwestern University's medical school) and graduated in 1905. At Illinois he was an outstanding student and graduated with a "special degree" awarded only to those students who had averaged 90 percent or better in all their medical courses. He was one of only two students to be so recognized in his graduating class and was the first black to receive the honor.48

While in medical school Barabin, like many of the health-care professionals who had migrated to the Arkansas delta in the 1890s, heard about the large black population in eastern Arkansas and decided to establish his practice in the area. He first traveled to Little Rock, where he passed the state's licensing exam. His performance on the exam was so strong that he was congratulated by the secretary of the medical examining board for scoring higher than all other black candidates and for having the second highest score of any applicant for an Arkansas license.49 After visiting several small delta towns, Barabin settled in Marianna and opened his practice. He only had forty dollars in borrowed money. His fortunes, however, experienced a phenomenal change. Between 1905 and 1910, Barabin accumulated real estate valued in excess of twenty thousand dollars, purchased a 283-acre farm, became director of the Mound Bayou (Mississippi) Cotton Seed Oil Manufacturing Company, and was the leading promoter of the Marianna-based Colored Progressive Land & Development Company. While accumulating a small fortune through his business interests, Barabin never lost his love for the challenge of medicine. His medical practice covered most of Lee County and required the constant use of four horses.50 Barabin had such an extensive practice because "he was one of the few Negro doctors who could afford to treat patients without pay."51 Unfortunately, he, like a number of his delta counterparts, was unable to withstand the crushing economic impact of the depression in the 1930s, which caused him to lose his farm and some of his other real estate holdings. On the verge of bankruptcy, he sold the few possessions he could salvage and moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas. When he left Marianna, the whole community mourned its loss.52

Perhaps the most successful corps of black medical professionals, in terms of both their practices and business interests, was located in Phillips County, which included the cities of Helena (the county seat), West Helena, Marvell, and several smaller settlements. The black health-care professionals who served these communities were drawn to the area because Helena was a rapidly growing Mississippi riverfront town and the county, as a whole, had a near majority black population, one that was not totally dependent on agriculture for its income. The economic possibilities appeared unlimited. Between 1880 and 1960, five dentists and nine physicians served Phillips County's black population.53

Little is known about the medical practice and community involvement of most of these men, but a few of them are still remembered by senior citizens in the county. One of the first to practice in Helena and Phillips County was Dr. David A. Johnston (Chicago Dental School). He was born in Helena in 1879 to Professor Lewis and Mercy Johnston, who operated a private school where their son was educated. Johnston's parents "were anxious for him to make a mark" and kept him in school longer than most youths of his age.54 Satisfied that their son could match anyone academically, they sent young David to Chicago to study dentistry. Following his graduation from dental school (the date is unclear), Johnston established a practice in Chicago before returning to Arkansas. He settled first in Pine Bluff but was practicing in Helena by 1910, when he married Maria E. Miller, a member of one of the town's oldest and most prominent black families.55 Her father, A. H. Miller, had been born a slave in St. Francis County in 1851. After emancipation young Miller entered the dray business in Helena and went on to become a minister, a state legislator during Reconstruction, and a successful businessman, who built a sizeable fortune through money lending and real estate investments. His son-in-law, David, was said to have had a "hypnotic" touch when removing bad teeth. "It is

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48Ibid., 329.
49Ibid.
50Ibid., 329–330.
51Bew interview.
From this information and documents mentioned in the Proctor House "Proctor History of the Race" (2008), we can infer that the Proctor House, also known as F.C. Hamilton House, was the residence of North Carolina, V. Williams. In 1966, the Proctor House was the first to establish a Black Men's Group. The information is compiled from various sources, including historical records and personal interviews with former residents and staff. The Proctor House has played a significant role in the history of the Black community at the University of Arkansas, providing a space for students, faculty, and staff to gather and build community. The Proctor House has also served as a center for cultural events, social gatherings, and community meetings. Today, the Proctor House is recognized as a historic landmark and is preserved as a testament to the legacy of the Black community at the University of Arkansas.
son of a successful brick manufacturer and contractor in Charlotte, who had amassed a small fortune working for his father before deciding to go to college and study biology. He went on to graduate from Biddle University (1887) and the Leonard Medical School of Shaw University (1891) where he specialized in obstetrics and was honored for being the most outstanding student in that field. Following his graduation from Shaw, he was hired by Biddle as its university physician and held that position for ten years. During the same period, 1891–1901, he served one year as president of the North Carolina Colored Medical Association and three years as the physician-in-charge of the North Carolina Samaritan Hospital for blacks in Charlotte. He was the first black appointed to the latter position. Houser moved to Arkansas in 1901 because of its climate and "teeming population of the race" which he saw as a "veritable Promised Land."  

For Houser the state was indeed that. Between 1901 and 1904, using capital he had accumulated while working for his father and as a physician in his home state, as well as profits from his local practice and business interests, Houser opened the Black Diamond Drug Company in the downtown business district of Helena. The company represented an investment in excess of seventy-five hundred dollars, a sizeable sum for the period. At the same time he invested heavily in local real estate, in the Phillips County Land and Investment Company, and became a major stockholder in the Mound Bayou (Mississippi) Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company. His business interests made him, in the words of Hamilton, the "cynosure of all eyes in town."  

A. H. Miller described Houser as an "ardent friend."  

Houser's success in Helena was paralleled, if not eclipsed, by that of Dr. R. A. Williams (Meharry, 1902). He was a native Arkansan, born in Forrest City in 1879. He completed his grade-school education in that city, but because there was no high school for blacks there, his parents sent him to the Danville Industrial High School in Danville, Virginia, to complete his secondary education. He graduated from Danville in 1893, returned to Arkansas and enrolled in the Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock. He became the institution's first college level graduate in 1896. Williams then returned to Forrest City where he taught in the black public school and operated a successful grocery business. Not satisfied with teaching and his business, Williams sought a stronger intellectual challenge, and at the age of nineteen, he applied to and was accepted by the Meharry Medical School as a student. At Meharry he distinguished himself in the study of gynecology and in his senior year (1902), won the institution's highly prized R. F. Boyd Medal for Excellence.  

Following his graduation from Meharry, Williams practiced medicine in Knoxville, Tennessee, before relocating in 1905 to Helena, where he quickly became a popular doctor and successful businessman. In fact, his business ventures were more successful than his medical practice. He was a strong supporter of the self-help philosophy championed by Booker T. Washington during the period, which meant that he was not only concerned with the health of his black clients, but also their social and economic welfare. This concern led him to found an organization called the Royal Circle of Friends of The World (RCFW) in 1909. The RCFW was a business organization, with a fraternal structure, that was dedicated to the moral, physical, and economic welfare of its members. One of the major goals of the organization was to offer benefits that would, at the very least, allow the impoverished black population of the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas and Mississippi to bury their dead without resorting to public solicitations. The success of the RCFW and Williams's other business interests often kept him out of his medical office for extended periods of time. He must have been a good doctor though, since his patients "were willing to suffer the inconvenience of his absence for weeks without consulting another physician."  

The first recruiting meeting of the RCFW was held in Helena, Arkansas, September 1–3, 1909. By the end of the month it had enrolled more than nine thousand members. Between 1909 and 111, the RCFW constructed over three hundred lodges scattered throughout Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. People were drawn to the RCFW by the excitement and mystery of a fraternal organization and, more important, by the prompt payment of claims filed against its sick, accident, and death endowment policies. The death endowment policy paid

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66Ibid., 325.  
67Ibid.  
68Ibid.  
69Miller, How I Succeeded in My Business, 61.  
70Hamilton, Beacon Lights of the Race, 289.  
71Ibid., 290.  
72Ibid., 121.
beneficiaries three hundred dollars in cash upon presentation of a valid death certificate. This was more than enough to “properly” bury friends and loved ones during the period. By 1911, the RCFW had paid more than twelve thousand dollars to holders of its death endowment policy. In 1915, due to the rapid growth of the RCFW, Williams moved to Chicago to oversee his expanding business empire.

Dr. Robert D. Miller met with more frustration in his career, though he was clearly a talented physician. Miller was a native of Phillips County and one of the sons of the aforementioned A.H. Miller. Born in 1908, Miller attended the black public school in Helena until the Elaine Riot of 1919. Following that extremely violent assault upon the black community, his parents, fearing for his safety, sent him to Boston, Massachusetts, to complete his education at Cushing Academy. Following his graduation, he matriculated at Howard University, where he majored in biology. From Howard, Miller traveled to Nashville to attend the Meharry Medical School. He graduated in 1933 and practiced medicine in Nashville until the lure of home drew him back to Helena, where he practiced for the remainder of his life.

Local senior citizens who remembered Miller described him as a good doctor, huge in physical stature, but very personable as well as gentle and patient with his patients. During the last fifteen or twenty years of Miller’s practice, he grew increasingly bitter toward the local white medical society because it denied him membership and the right to treat his patients in the local hospital. He was forced by this strict Jim Crowism to send patients in need of hospitalization to nearby Mound Bayou, Mississippi, an all-black town across the river from Helena. He even delivered one of his sons in the Mound Bayou hospital.

The lack of access to local public hospitals was a common problem faced by black doctors throughout the Arkansas delta, because those hospitals would only admit patients referred by members of the local white medical society. To overcome this handicap, some of the black doctors made arrangements with local white physicians to treat their patients when hospitalization was required. The patients of black physicians who did not have agreements with local white doctors were often denied needed medical care.

In the final analysis, such discrimination was the common denominator in the careers of black doctors and dentists, who otherwise often led very different lives. It is clear that some black health care professionals were able to build successful practices in the Mississippi Delta regions of northeast and eastern Arkansas. Many others, however, were forced to struggle just to keep their doors open. In order to continue to practice medicine, many had to have other sources of income. Dr. Samuel F. Clark, who practiced in Newport, also operated a drugstore. The elderly widow of Dr. William B. Black, another black Newport physician, said that her husband had to survive on income received from the extensive landholding of his father in the county. In the northeast Arkansas city of Jonesboro (Craighead County), Dr. E.L. Ezell (Meharry, 1899), the only black doctor in the county, was forced to operate a combination shoe store and grocery in his office building in an attempt to draw patients and earn enough money to support himself and his family. Those dentists and physicians who did not have other sources of income to supplement their meager earnings from the practice of medicine often faced hard times. Though later quite successful, Dr. King H. Nunn early in his career “only charged two dollars to pull a tooth,” recalled his widow, “and often fell behind on his equipment payments due to the poverty of his patients, and had to dodge the bill collectors.”

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73 Ibid., 293; Fragmented copies of the Royal Messenger, the RCFW's newspaper, can be found in the Helena Museum of History which is located in the public library, Helena, Arkansas.
74 Dunning interview; Reed interview.
75 Miller, How I Succeeded In My Business, 20.
76 There is little documented information on the life and medical practice of Dr. Robert Dan Miller. The information in this essay came from several interviews with his son, Dr. Robert Dan Miller Jr., beginning April 10, 1997, and other Phillips County residents who remembered Dr. Miller. Dr. Robert D. Miller Jr., has practiced medicine in Helena since 1965.
77 Reed interview; Dunning interview. Dunning worked in Dr. Miller’s office as a receptionist and errand runner for two years, 1948–1949, while attending high school.
78 Miller interview.
79 Mays, “Black Business Community Prospers With City;” Registry of Physicians, Jackson County Court House.
80 Thelma Parks, interview by author, August 30, 1993, Jonesboro, Arkansas. Parks, in her late seventies, was delivered by Dr. Ezell and later worked for him as a part-time maid and store clerk.
81 Nunn interview.
Riding Circuit in Arkansas, 1844-1845: An Excerpt from the Autobiography of Reverend William Graham

DONALD L. PARMAN

William Graham, a young Methodist preacher from York, Pennsylvania, first entered Arkansas in the fall of 1844. After crossing the Mississippi at Memphis, Graham rode horseback to Little Rock where the Methodists had scheduled their annual conference. Once he arrived at the state capital, the Arkansas Conference assigned Graham to the Fort Smith Circuit, a long and difficult series of stops that ran south of Fort Smith into the heart of the Ouachita Mountains and then circled back to the starting point. The account reprinted below contains Graham's memories of his experiences during his one-year stay in Arkansas a half-century earlier.

Graham's background reveals a great deal about the man, but it also shows that Methodism at the time was a highly dynamic denomination. Graham was born in 1821 a few miles east of York, Pennsylvania, and he grew up in a large, extremely poor, religious family. Because of the family's intense poverty, when William was old enough to work he was farmed out to more prosperous German neighbors. During the summers he earned

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