

MEDICAL HISTORY

DAVID JONES PECK, MD: A DREAM DENIED

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Almost every day, we read or hear stories in the media about someone being the first to do this or that. Having such a distinction may be important to a few people or to many. Very often, the person recognized as being first has little awareness of and probably no intention that he or she is about to take a distinguishing step. Such is probably the case for David Jones Peck, who, in 1847 became the first African American to earn a medical degree from a recognized medical school in the United States.¹⁻⁴ The first black American to earn a medical degree, James McCune Smith, received his training in Scotland.⁵⁻⁸ Of course, there were “black physicians without portfolio” earlier in the history of the United States who gave medical care: (the runaway Negro, Simon (1740); the Negro, Caesar (late 18th century); James Derham (or Durham, late 18th century); and Martin Robinson Delany (apprenticed as a cupper and leecher, mid to late 19th century, enrolled at Harvard medical school 1850, but only for one term—dismissed after a vote of his white classmates).⁹

The period following the Declaration of Independence was a turbulent one. There were strong efforts by certain religious groups such as the Quakers to eliminate the evil of black slavery. Manumission set many enslaved blacks free near the end of the 18th century and expansion of the population west was gaining momentum. The seeds of the schism that was to divide and drive the nation into Civil War in the middle of the 19th century were being sown.

Young David Peck grew up in a home that valued education and encouraged achievement. He watched his father and other strong, black men in Pittsburgh “stand up to” the political and legal system that did its best to keep black people down. He learned well the valuable

lessons taught about how to organize people to work together for a righteous cause—the abolition of slavery. His is a story worth telling.

My interest in David Peck arose from a question put to me by several black medical students who wanted to know who he was and why Rush Medical College gave an award in his name. Of course, I have read some of the history of the Medical College¹⁰ and knew of the principles and sentiments of its founder, Dr Daniel Brainard.¹¹ I knew what those histories said about David Peck and how they sketchily described his tenure at Rush. My initial investigations and a search of the Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke’s Medical Center Archives stimulated a search that has now gone on for 3½ years.

I have learned a lot about David Peck and those associated with him both at Rush and elsewhere. There remains much more to be learned. But let me begin my story...

David Jones Peck was the first born of John C. and “Sally” (or Sarah) Peck, free colored persons, who lived in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, at the time of his birth (1826 or 1827).^{12,13} Census records and a newspaper account indicate that John was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, and that Sarah was a native Pennsylvanian.^{14,15} Records from the Cumberland (Pennsylvania) county historical society speak of Sarah’s induction into the Methodist church of Carlisle.¹² John “mastered the mysteries of the tonsorial profession” and had a successful career as a barber and a wigmaker in Carlisle.¹² It was also in Carlisle that John responded to his ministerial calling, establishing an “African Methodist” church. John was licensed to preach in 1834.¹⁴

In 1837, John and Sarah moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.¹⁴ That same year, a daughter, Mary, was born. The record is not clear on whether there were additional children born into the Peck family.

John Peck is known as an ardent and effective anti-slavery advocate and “one of the principal stockholders in the underground railroad” in Pennsylvania.^{9,16,17} He

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was associated with such heroes of the abolitionist and antislavery movement of the pre-Civil War era in Pennsylvania as “Daddy” Ben Richards, Reverend Louis Woodson, John B. Vashon, and Martin R. Delany.¹⁶

It was in the tumultuous days of the underground railroad in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that John’s son, David was “baptized” into a life of activism, achievement, and service so ably demonstrated by his father. Additionally, there was an emphasis on education, which culminated in the establishment of a school for colored children in which the Peck family played a major role. David’s early education occurred in that school, and thanks to John’s success in business, David had the opportunity to matriculate at the Collegiate Institute at Oberlin, Ohio, where he attended from 1841 to 1844.¹⁸

The Chicago city directory¹⁹ for 1845 records that David Jones Peck was a “student of Dr Brainard’s” (Daniel Brainard was the founder [1837] and president of Rush Medical College, which he named after Benjamin Rush, a physician and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence). It appears, however, that David did not matriculate in the college until 1846.

In the *Fifth Annual Announcement for 1847-1848 and Catalogue for 1846-47 of the Rush Medical College*,¹ David Peck’s name appears among the list of 70 medical students in that cohort. His preceptor was Charles V. Dyer, MD, known at the time as perhaps the most ardent abolitionist in the state of Illinois.

While a medical student at Rush Medical College in Chicago in 1846 and 1847, his presence in the College was objected to by several students, particularly by a fellow student named James F. Saunders³ from Indiana. Although the faculty favored Peck remaining at Rush, Dr Brainard, founder and president of the college, left it to the students to decide whether or not he should. In reminiscences of one of Peck’s classmates, John Ingersoll³ wrote, “He (Dr Brainard) then left the hall, and the students after talking the matter over put it to a vote and we admitted the darkey whooping.” David successfully completed the two 8-week sessions then required for graduation from Rush Medical College in the spring of 1847.

During the summer of 1847, before he established his medical practice, Peck accompanied William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and others on the anti-slavery/abolitionist lecture circuit in Ohio. In a letter to Boston that summer, Garrison identified his young protegee as “...Dr Peck (he is a fine, promising colored young man, son of my old friend, John Peck, now of

Pittsburgh and formerly of Carlyle) who has lately graduated at the Rush Medical School of Chicago.”² In a dispatch filed at Richfield, Ohio, on August 25, 1847, Garrison reported an incident that occurred at Higley’s Tavern:

The landlord came out and took off our baggage, supposing that Dr Peck was Mr Douglass. I requested him to show us a chamber, and he did so, without saying a word. As soon as he left us, I said to my friend Peck, “Doctor, I am inclined to think, from the looks of the landlord, that our company is not desirable here.”... (Mr Higley then spoke to the landlord, Mr Briggs, brother of the then Governor of Massachusetts), who declared to him that no nigger could be allowed to sit at his table, and that if any such attempt were made, there would be a mess—not that he had any objection himself, but his boarders would not allow it.²

Dr Peck opened a medical/surgical practice in Philadelphia in 1848 near the Philadelphia Institute, Lombard Street above Seventh.²⁰ Living quarters were a red-brick row house at 223 Lombard Street, which was to be home until late 1850.^{21,22} Peck shared this dwelling with his wife, Mary E. Peck (nee Lewis). The couple were married in Chicago on July 24, 1849.²³ Their marriage took place in the reformed Presbyterian church, pastored by the Reverend Alexander Morrison Stewart,^{24,25} a fellow Pennsylvanian. The record uncovered so far is devoid of information on Mary E. Lewis. There is no currently available evidence that the Pecks had any children, and the writer is unaware of the fate of Mrs Peck after the appearance of her name in the Pittsburgh manuscript census of 1850.¹⁵

In February 1848, Peck was unceremoniously thrown out of Thomas’ Auction Store having gone there to purchase medical books. J. Herron Foster, editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, commenting on this incident wrote:

We presume this gross insult was perpetrated on a young man of education, simply to curry favor with the southern students who were in attendance. Mr Thomas has doubtless the face of a free man and the disposition of a slave.²⁶

Nothing else seems to have been recorded about David and Mary Peck’s doings in Philadelphia (or elsewhere in Pennsylvania) except for mention of the Peck’s residential address in the Philadelphia city directories of 1849 and 1850. One item appeared in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* that related to a controversy over the recommendation that Dr Peck be named physician

to colored children in the Home of Refuge,²⁷ a major orphanage in Philadelphia.

Victor Ullman⁹ makes a credible argument (and I concur) that young Dr Peck not be blamed for giving up on medical practice in Philadelphia because, despite all of his efforts to educate himself for a career of service, he must have thought to himself, "Education—for what?" He had come in good faith to set up a medical practice in Philadelphia and was met at every turn by disappointment and rejection. Martin R. Delany, David's mentor, about the time of passage of the Fugitive Slave Laws, began formulating plans for establishment of homelands in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa for both free blacks and those in bondage. Delaney wrote that "He (David Jones Peck) left there (Philadelphia) in 1850."⁷

David and Mary Peck moved "home" to heal the wounds inflicted by bigotry and hard times encountered in the city of "brotherly love." One also might speculate that this was a time for planning a future someplace where one's skills and character, not skin color, determined success.

Rollin²⁸ (Frances A. Rollin [nee Whipper], daughter of William Whipper, another of the Pennsylvania black abolitionists), Ullman,⁹ and Dorothy Sterling²⁹ relate that young Dr Peck was preparing to head for California in the early 1850s. While in New York awaiting passage to the other side of the continent, Peck encountered his old mentor, Martin Robinson Delany, who persuaded him to change his plans and look into possibilities for a black homeland in Central America.

From Boston, Massachusetts, on January 2, 1851, Dr Peck made application for a passport using Martin Delany as a reference.¹³ One can speculate that the recently enacted Fugitive Slave Laws, which came on the heels of his inability to build a successful medical practice in Philadelphia, might have prompted him to move out of "harm's way."

The response to the application was written on the original document, which was returned. It read: "Passports are not issued under such circumstances."¹³ It is interesting to note that a similar fate befell Robert Purvis, a noted black Philadelphia abolitionist, 17 years earlier. Purvis applied for a passport to travel to Europe in the customary way, through his congressman, Horace Binney. In response, he received a sheet of paper on which was scribbled words to the effect that Purvis was a "colored American" entitled to the protection of American officials abroad. Purvis was patently denied the title of "citizen of the United States" because of his mixed ancestry. It required intervention with President

Andrew Jackson to have a passport issued.³⁰ Not much had changed for free blacks in the two intervening decades.

Peck had his attorney, the black Bostonian, Robert Morris, write to Daniel Webster, then US secretary of state, to request an explanation as to why the passport application had been denied.³¹ No reply to this request is extant. It appears that the passport was denied because Peck was colored. It also seems clear that Peck was determined to escape from the frustration and danger faced by all blacks in the wake of passage of the Fugitive Slave Laws. These statutes gave no protection to free blacks who were just as vulnerable as runaway slaves to capture by slave hunters and subsequent transport to the South. In fact, many free blacks fled the United States for Canada and other places.³⁴

It was to San Juan del Norte (Greytown) that young David Peck came and found the total absence of a color line.⁹ He was immediately named port physician (over a British physician who had 11 years' experience) and developed a successful medical practice. He was welcomed into the community and soon assumed leadership in the establishment of a black-dominated government.

It was a case of being in the right place at the right time with the right tools. David had been trained in the antislavery/abolitionist "school" of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, under the tutelage of his father, John C. Peck, Rev Lewis Woodson, Ben Richards, John Vashon, Martin Delany, and others. David and George B. Vashon, even as preteens, had organized and run the Pittsburgh Juvenile Antislavery Society.³² After David completed medical school, he and several of his political colleagues became the "young black Turks" of Philadelphia and spoke out in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* about a Philadelphia exhibition of "The Last Supper and the Trial and Crucifixion of the Savior," which was to be made available for viewing by people of color on a particular day of the week. This group of proud black men represented the indignation of the colored citizens of Philadelphia over this "insult."³³

David continued his outspokenness and leadership with an article that appeared in Frederick Douglass' *North Star* about a meeting to organize a group to be called the National League, an organization for the "Union of the oppressed for the sake of Freedom."³⁴ David served as secretary of the group. A subsequent report on the progress of the National League appeared in the same newspaper about 3 weeks later.³⁵

The organizational and political skills he learned

were put to good use in Nicaragua. He chaired a convention called to establish a black democracy in Greytown (San Juan del Norte). The convention elected “Dr Martin R. Delany mayor of Greytown, civil governor of the Mosquito Reservation and commander-in-chief of the military forces of the province.”⁹ Documents are yet to be found that give details of Dr Peck’s other activities in Central America.

Hershberg³⁶ suggested that he returned to the United States after the Civil War and was involved in the Pennsylvania States Equal Rights League. This author so far has not been able to corroborate this assertion.

The remainder of the story of Dr David Jones Peck awaits telling until the more difficult research into his life is done. This will require a thorough search of period newspapers, manuscript archives, and yet-to-be-identified personal papers of people who may have interacted with him. The story of his family, which had a significant impact on the religious, social, and business life of Pittsburgh, also will need to be further investigated.

EPILOGUE

I have gotten a great deal of satisfaction from my search for information about Dr David Jones Peck. Two-and-a-half years ago, he was a relative stranger. Now I know him as a frustrated dreamer who was unafraid to act on his dreams. David Peck rose up from a black family of achievers at a time when achievement by blacks was actively discouraged.

One comes to appreciate how a historian can become consumed with the chase, hungry for the next scrap of information and thrilled when the elements of a story come together. Developing strategies and pursuing leads makes the hunt for historical quarry exciting.

Sometimes the searcher learns more about the “supporting players” than about the “star” himself. The upside of this process is that one comes away knowing more than he ever thought he would about a time not his own. The downside is a sense of loss when the story he hoped to tell may not be told because relevant facts are not available and may never be. Even this amateur historian gained insight into the process of “spin” that our forbears cast on their “truth”—for their favor and against the positions of their rivals.

For an amateur like me who attempts to reconstruct the past, there is still satisfaction in this search for the “truth” and a growing awareness of the debt we owe to forbears such as Dr David Jones Peck who “broke the trail” for African Americans in medicine. I have learned to value the systematic effort necessary to preserve rel-

evant present “truth” to assure those who follow reasonably interpret data to arrive at “fair” conclusions about the past. I have learned to value the importance of persistence in the search for historical facts. Historians deserve our respect for their efforts to reconstruct it.

It seems clear that history is to a great extent shaped by the awareness of people that preservation of their actions and records of them are important. Other historical figures either do not care about their impact or fail to see the value of leaving a record of it. Such seems to be the case for many of the offspring of African-American “movers and shakers” of the 19th century who did not “cut the same wide swath” as did their parents. The children of Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany, and John C. Peck are among these.

The story presented above is not complete. This researcher intends to quest onward for the not-so-easy pieces that remain to be found in the life story of David Jones Peck.

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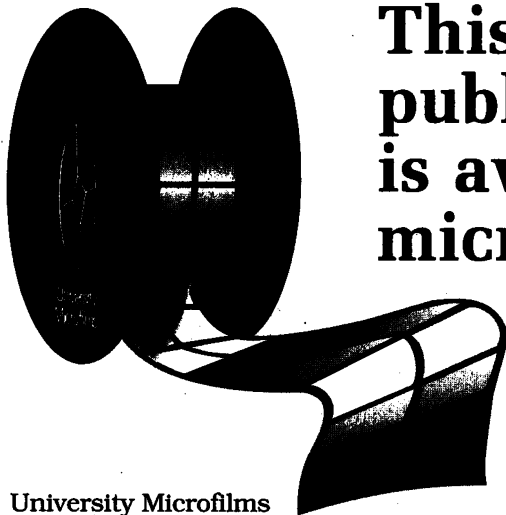
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