James McCune Smith:

Medical doctor, anti-slavery leader, and prominent intellectual

James McCune Smith, MD. Engraving by Patrick H. Reason, New-York Historical Society. Public domain

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> "No man in this country more thoroughly understands the whole struggle between freedom and slavery, than does Dr. Smith, and his heart is as broad as his understanding."[1]
>
> —Frederick Douglass

Largely overlooked by historians, Dr. James McCune Smith played a major role in the struggle for racial equality in antebellum America. As the first professionally trained Black physician in the United States, McCune Smith served as the medical director of New York City's Colored Orphan Asylum for more than 20 years, caring for hundreds of poor children, until it was burned down by an angry mob in 1863.

In addition to being a first-rate physician, McCune Smith was a leading abolitionist and preeminent essayist, drawing on his training in medicine and statistics to debunk common misconceptions about race, intelligence, medicine, and myriad social constructs. Well ahead of his time, he envisioned a society based on the unity of the human race, in

which "…the colored people will act just like any other men placed in their circumstances, and therefore will attain high influence in the destiny of our common country."[2]

Early years and medical training

McCune Smith was born on April 18, 1813, to Lavinia, a self-emancipated bondwoman, who had been a slave in Charleston, South Carolina and moved to New York City. The identity of his father, who by most accounts was White, remains controversial. In personal letters, McCune Smith states he came from "doubtful parentage" and acknowledges having "kindred in a southern state, some of them slaveholders, others slaves," suggesting his father owned slaves.[2] His medical school application listed his father as Samuel Smith, a New York merchant, but this may have been fabricated to meet enrollment requirements.

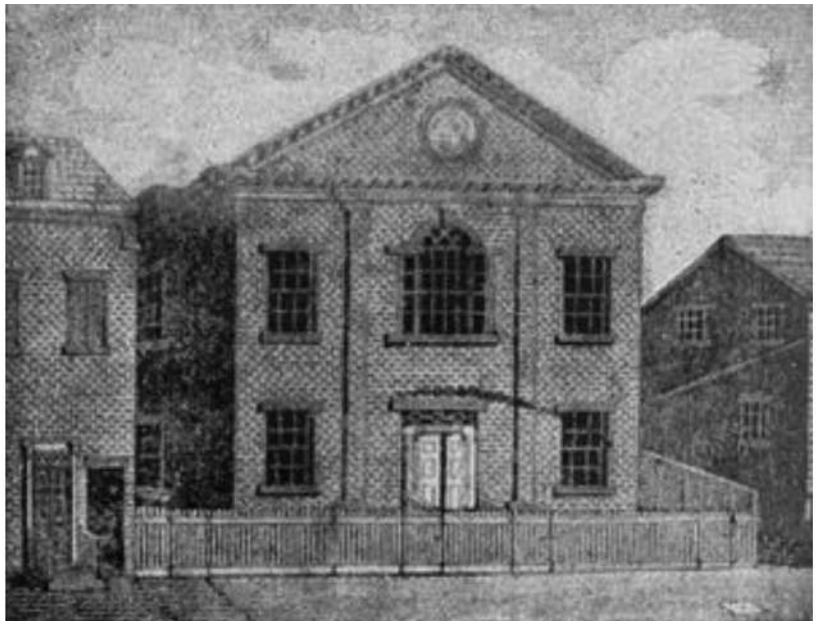
McCune Smith was educated at African Free School No. 2 in New York City. Founded in 1787 by members of the New York Manumission Society, including Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, the school's mission was to provide education to children of slaves and free people of color. As the top student of his class, McCune Smith was selected by the headmaster, Charles Andrews, to deliver the welcome address to one of the most venerated public figures of the time, the Marquis de Lafayette. The French aristocrat and Revolutionary War hero was also a member of the New York Manumission Society, and was visiting the school during his final tour of the U.S. in 1824. In a speech addressed to Lafayette and delivered before 450 fellow schoolmates, the 11-year-old McCune Smith expressed

> …sincere and respectful gratitude to you for the condescension you have manifested this day in visiting this institution, which is one of the noblest specimens of New York philanthropy…and while it will be our pleasure to remember the great deeds you have done for America, it will be our delight also to cherish the memory of General Lafayette as a friend to African emancipation, and as a member of this institution.[2]

McCune Smith was officially freed from bondage at the age of 14 years. The New York State Gradual Emancipation act of 1799 granted freedom to all male children born to slave mothers after July 4, 1799, but only after serving their masters until the age of 28 years. A subsequent abolition law passed in 1817 effectively terminated slavery among State residents on July 4, 1827. On this occasion, McCune Smith felt instantly transformed, having lived in the "gloom of midnight, dark and seemingly hopeless, dark and seemingly rayless," and suddenly facing the "joyful light of day."[2]

Under the tutelage of the headmaster, McCune Smith learned spelling, penmanship, grammar, geography, and astronomy, but, perhaps most invaluably, the conviction that Blacks were as smart and capable as everyone else, and that the higher walks of life were within their reach. During his studies, McCune Smith labored six days a week as a blacksmith to earn a living, leading one of his friends to remark that he was always "at a forge with the bellows handle in one hand and a Latin grammar in the other."[2]

After graduating from the African Free School with honors in 1828, McCune Smith was tutored further by Rev. Peter C. Williams, Jr., also a graduate of the African Free School and the second Black priest to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. Williams, who is widely recognized as having helped hundreds of Black students during his life, taught Latin to McCune Smith and encouraged him to apply to medical school. However, McCune Smith was denied entry to U.S. medical schools solely based on his race. Drawing on his ties in Scotland, Rev. Williams secured admission for McCune Smith at the University of Glasgow, the prestigious institution that had produced



African Free School No. 2. Engraving by alumnus Patrick H. Reason.
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such luminaries as the engineer and mathematician, James Watt, and the renowned moral philosopher and economist, Adam Smith. Rev. Williams and other benefactors from the African Free School provided McCune Smith with money for the overseas trip and his medical education.

McCune Smith's arrival in the United Kingdom shortly preceded the Parliamentary Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which expanded the jurisdiction of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and outlawed the purchase or ownership of slaves throughout the British Empire. Upon disembarking in Liverpool, McCune Smith became acutely aware of the boundless possibilities awaiting him, remarking in his journal, "I could embrace the soil on which I now live, since it yields…a greater amount of rational liberty than is secured to man in any other portion of the globe."[3]

McCune Smith's departure from New York City proved to be timely, as racial tensions were running high there, culminating in a three-day riot in July 1834, in which mobs fearful of racial equality destroyed the home and church of Rev. Williams and set fire to the African Free School.

A charter member of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, McCune Smith quickly earned a reputation among his White peers as a brilliant and dedicated scholar. He studied a variety of disciplines for his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees, ranging from Latin and Greek to moral philosophy and practical astronomy. His medical school requirements included courses in anatomy, chemistry, medical procedures and practices, midwifery, surgery, and botany.

At the Royal Infirmary, he completed a 12-month clinical clerkship led by the renowned epidemiologist, Robert Perry. After spending several months doing clinical work in Paris, he took a two-hour oral exam before the medical school faculty and passed with honors.

Apropos of his later writing and political activism, McCune Smith was also a beneficiary of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, which emphasized empiricism and inductive reasoning, and valued virtue and practical benefit for the individual and society as a whole. During his years in the University, he experienced an unparalleled sense of academic and social equality, and the only documented instance in which he faced differential treatment on the basis of his skin color came upon the return voyage to New York. The American Captain Bigley of the *Canonicus* initially insisted that he travel in steerage, and only after the intercession of his White friends and colleagues at the Glasgow Emancipation Society was he allowed to sail home as a cabin passenger.

Within a few years of his return to the U.S., McCune Smith married Malvina Barnet, who was a recent graduate of Rutgers Female Institute, the first chartered women's college in New York City, and the daughter of one of the most esteemed Black families in New York City. Together, they made a home near his medical practice and had 11 children, five of whom survived into adulthood.

Physician and medical scholar

Upon his return to New York in 1837, McCune Smith was received as a celebrity by the leaders of the city's 16,000 Blacks. He immediately established a general medical practice and pharmacy on West Broadway, advertising his services in the *Colored American*. These included "Bleeding, Tooth-drawing, Cupping, and Leeching."[4] In addition to treating the area's Black patients, McCune Smith also cared for other poor patients of all races. His reputation as an outstanding physician spread quickly, earning him the respect of leading White physicians and scientists of the metropolitan community.

In December 1846, McCune Smith was unanimously appointed physician to the Colored Orphan Asylum, which was founded by two Quaker women in 1834 to provide housing and care for impoverished Black orphans, many of whom were abused, neglected, or abandoned. Despite his best efforts to improve the health of these children by administering vaccinations against smallpox, reducing overcrowding, and improving ventilation, roughly one in every 20 children died from measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis during that period.

McCune Smith's lofty reputation as a brilliant and dedicated physician did little to prevent him from encountering frequent and often flagrant episodes of discrimination. When he was denied use of the rail service and forced to walk seven miles to and from work, the directors of the Asylum intervened on his behalf and hired a private conveyance. He continued to care for the children at the Asylum until it was destroyed on July 13, 1863 during New York City's Draft Riots. Indignant at a new Congressional law mandating the drafting of young men to fight in the Civil War, and the clause exempting wealthier men, who could afford to pay the $300 (more than $9,000 in today's currency) commutation fee to hire a substitute, the working-class rioters quickly turned on the city's Black residents, accusing them of stealing their jobs and accepting lower wages. Apart from the Civil War, the Draft Riots remain the largest racially motivated insurrection in American history, forcing President Abraham Lincoln to divert several regiments of militia and volunteer troops after the Battle of Gettysburg in order to quell the violence and take control of the city. Fearing for his family's safety,

McCune Smith was forced to moved his residence and medical practice to Brooklyn.

McCune Smith distinguished himself from his peers by his scholarly approach to medicine. In 1840, he prepared the first case report by an American Black physician, entitled "Case of ptyalism with fatal termination." John Watson, an Irish-born surgeon at New York Hospital and consultant on the case, was asked to read the report before the New York Medical and Surgical Society in place of McCune Smith, who was barred from presenting "lest it interfere with the harmony of the young institution."[3]

The report highlights the case of a woman receiving calomel (mercurous chloride) pills, a commonly used laxative at the time. She presented with severe ileocecal pain, which may have been appendicitis or ovarian pain, tongue swelling and 'ptyalism' (profuse salivation), likely due to mercury-induced swelling of the salivary glands, and stomatitis. Following standard medical practices for such afflictions, McCune Smith and Watson blistered the nape of her neck, applied leeches to the submandibular region and induced bleeding of the tongue through deep longitudinal incisions, which reduced the swelling of the patient's tongue and lips.[3] Notwithstanding the potential iatrogenic harm he may have caused by prescribing a powder containing mercury, and his inability to pinpoint the medical diagnosis prior to the patient's ultimate demise several weeks later, McCune Smith demonstrated an avid willingness to learn from his futile therapies and to disseminate the knowledge gained from this case throughout the broader medical community.

In 1844, McCune Smith published the first medical scientific paper by a Black American physician, a case series in the *New York Journal of Medicine* describing five women with amenorrhea related to opium use, and the restoration of regular menses upon discontinuation of opium.[3] Drawing on his Glasgow education in scientific method and statistics, he also reviewed and re-analyzed the primary medical records of New York orphanages and published an article refuting an earlier report, which claimed that homeopathic treatments improved childhood mortality.

In his writings and in numerous lectures to the general public and to science students, McCune Smith used human skulls, anatomic drawings, and statistical analysis to disprove prevailing phrenological claims that the intellectual capacities of a person could be deduced by measuring the dimensions of the cranium. In response to pro-slavery arguments based on the 1840 Census, which reported higher insanity and mortality rates among free Blacks of the North relative to enslaved Blacks in the South, McCune Smith pointed out that annual mortality rates do not reflect longevity without correcting for age, and constructed statistical tables showing that Northern Blacks were in fact living longer, achieving scholastically on par with Whites, and attending church more, while suffering less from insanity than their enslaved Southern counterparts.

Abolitionist and intellectual

Having established a highly successful clinical practice, McCune Smith was "not content with obtaining personal financial security, [and] devoted a considerable portion of his time to the cause of his people."[5] In the same year he returned from Scotland, he joined William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, a precursor to the Liberty Party, which was the first political party specifically committed to ending slavery through nonviolent means. However, by the mid-1840s, he became disillusioned with the Liberty Party, whose members advocated for "disunion" from the federal government and the creation of a utopian society free of slavery, since he believed they did not share his definition of freedom or his vision of true racial equality. He coined the term "Garrisonism" to describe the disparaging paternalism displayed by wealthy Whites who expected Blacks to feel grateful to them while doing very little to actually champion their rights or improve their condition.

In 1846, Gerrit Smith, a wealthy White abolitionist from Peterboro, New York, and founder of the Liberty Party, donated roughly 40 acres of land in the Adirondacks to each of 3,000 poor New York state Blacks, including many members of the African Free School. The intention was to adapt the Jeffersonian ideal of the independent yeoman farmer and establish a thriving Black community, named "Timbucto" after the mythical city in West Africa. Among other benefits, Timbucto would allow recipients to become self-sufficient without confronting overt racial prejudice, and enable them to obtain suffrage, as New York state law at the time required Black residents to hold $250 of freehold property in order to vote.

As a prominent member of New York's abolitionist movement, McCune Smith was asked to serve as the principal trustee to distribute deeds to the recipients. This settlement was well in line with his own convictions, since, unlike other activists of the time who advocated for emigration of American Blacks to Canada, Liberia, and the West Indies, McCune Smith believed that the only way to overturn slavery and achieve racial equality was for

Blacks to forge change from within the system, without leaving the country of their birth. He did not view the Constitution as a pro-slavery document, as did Garrison and other members of the Liberty Party, but rather as a natural offspring of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that all men are created equal and are endowed with certain unalienable rights.

The political events of the 1850s served to radicalize McCune Smith along with many of his fellow abolitionists, and they officially adopted the use of force to achieve their desired reforms. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850, brokered by Senator Henry Clay to reconcile the interests of Southern slave-holders with those of Northern Free-Soilers. Designed to appease the growing secessionist sentiment in the South, the law sanctioned the kidnapping and enslavement of free Blacks, sparking a decline in New York City's Black population. Subsequently, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, opening the Northern territories to slavery. Finally, in the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 7-2 against Scott, who had brought forth a law suit for his family's freedom on the grounds that they had lived for four years in the free state of Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, with the justices declaring that Blacks did not share citizenship rights, and therefore could not sue in federal court.

Depiction of the July 13, 1863 attack on the Colored Orphan Asylum.
The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library Digital Collections

Undeterred by the ultimately unsuccessful experiment of Timbucto, McCune Smith and Gerrit Smith joined forces with Douglass and White abolitionist John Brown to co-found the Radical Abolition Party. The Party espoused righteous violence to achieve its stated goals of ending the sin of slavery and bringing to fruition a Biblically preordained society of morals.

In June 1855, as the first Black American to chair a national political convention, McCune Smith gave a moving keynote address to the inaugural gathering of the Radical Abolitionists in Syracuse, New York, in which he maintained that the party's members were "God's disciples", destined to carry out God's plan…until all the soil [in the country] shall be consecrated to human freedom."[8]

In case there was any ambiguity as to the meaning of this call to action, John Brown, quoting Hebrews 9.22, reminded the delegates that "without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin," and proceeded to collect 60 dollars for the purchase of muskets, pistols, and bayonets to fight slaveholders in the Bleeding Kansas conflicts.[1]

The espousal of violent means to achieve their goals proved to be the undoing of the Radical Abolitionists, culminating in Brown's ill-fated raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry to liberate slaves in 1859, an event that sent Brown to his execution and Gerrit Smith to the insane asylum. Although the Radical Abolition Party won few votes and never elected a candidate to office, the friendship forged between these two White and two Black men represented an unprecedented interracial allegiance that foreshadowed the Civil War.

For McCune Smith, the emancipation of slaves was only a first step toward his ideal of the "eternal equality of the Human race." In order for Blacks to achieve equal social status to Whites, he believed first "the heart of the whites must be changed, thoroughly, entirely, permanently changed."[1] According to him, this change of heart could only come about if Whites understood what it was like to be Black, and this formed the motivation for much of his subsequent writing.

Douglass, who considered McCune Smith the most important Black influence on his life, asked him to write the Introduction to his book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855. In addition, Douglass invited McCune Smith to become the New York correspondent of his new newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, in which he was given free rein to write on any topic of his choosing.

In a departure from the conventional dispassionate style of his scientific works, McCune Smith's often witty and ironic short pieces for Douglass's paper were in the form of letters directly addressing Douglass and signed under the pseudonym "Communipaw," an interracial community of Africans, Lenape Indians, and Dutch settlers in New Jersey that had served as a literary inspiration for Washington Irving. In these essays, McCune Smith highlighted the examples of successful interracial and integrated communities around the world, lampooned hypocritical "anti-slavery reformers," and exhorted solidarity and self-help among Blacks, most of whom were not equally oppressed based on geographical location and skin tone.

Although many Whites and Blacks, including Gerrit Smith and Douglass, used the standard of the day to support Republican Party candidates in the late 1850s, McCune Smith argued in his essay, "Horoscope," that judged by the higher standard of "human brotherhood,"[2] candidates such as Horace Greeley, who, while outwardly opposing the spread of slavery, nevertheless "…avowed, in coarse terms, his belief in the inferiority of the negro to the white man, and his disgust at the idea of social commingling with his black brother."[2]

Some of McCune Smith's essays extolled the virtues of prominent Blacks, such as Aaron Roberts, a former slave, who, without formal training, became a systems design engineer and invented an apparatus that allowed firefighters to expel water at the flames of tall buildings. However, unlike many prominent Black luminaries, including Douglass, who wished to highlight the lives and achievements of distinguished Black members of society in their publications, McCune Smith believed it was not necessary to seek approbation by the established White cultural authority in order to advocate for the ideals of racial freedom and equality for all Blacks.

Rather than adhere to the writing conventions of White intellectuals, in his later years, McCune Smith's essays turned more subjective while avoiding the sentimentalism that was common for the time. He began experimenting with Black dialect and fragmented narrative long before these literary techniques became fashionable. In a series of 10 biographical portraits entitled "Heads of the Colored People," he described nameless Black working-class men and women as they were, with all their virtues and their vices, using their profession as a window into their character.

While Douglass and others argued that menial labor debased the status of Blacks in society, McCune Smith believed that manual work required enormous intellectual skill and energy, and that the line between artist and artisan was often blurred, as in the case of the whitewasher, who, "…with brush fastened at the end of a ten foot pole, strikes the lofty ceiling with swift, are, and even strokes, and draws parallels as perfect some 60 or 70 feet long, without break or wave or scratch of any kind."[2] He held the self-made man in high esteem and portrayed the downtrodden of society as often more enlightened and virtuous than the rich and famous.

In "The Boot-Black," McCune Smith lauds the simple shoe shiner, who rises from slavery, and through hard work and moral virtue is able to purchase a "fine property in sight of the manor" and raise a daughter who is "… well skilled in English, French, Drawing, and Music, and supports herself by teaching a private school of her own…."[2] Far from being an artless laborer lacking grit, McCune Smith's washerwoman gracefully carries out her work to the syncopated beat "Dunk! Dunk!" while displaying great strength and determination as her hand and wrist "…swell up with knotted muscles and bursting veins…and [her] eye and brow [are] chiseled out for stern resolve and high thought."[2]

In "The Destiny of the People of Color," McCune Smith anticipated the profound influence that Blacks would have on American culture in the 20th century, including in music, literature, and the performing arts.[2] Although he became less active in his medical profession in the early 1860s due to a deteriorating heart condition, McCune Smith remained the heart and soul of New York's Black community, and the backroom behind his medical office continued to serve as the "rallying center," which was "visited daily by men, young and old [who] held discussions and debates on all topics of the day."[4]

Until his death, McCune Smith vigorously advocated for Black rights, and continued to organize conventions in New York City and Philadelphia to promote the education of Blacks, to repeal the New York State Black suffrage restriction, and to overturn the apprenticeship programs enacted in many Southern states after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, arguing they were merely a form of serfdom and incompatible with racial equality.

On November 17, 1865, seven months after Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, Virginia, essentially ending the American Civil War, McCune Smith died of heart failure at the age of 52 years.

The legacy

Several factors may explain why McCune Smith, a prominent physician, abolitionist, and intellectual is not as widely

recognized. He lacked the charisma and oratorical skills of Douglass. His preferred medium, the essay, published primarily in Black newspapers of the time, lacked the readership and longevity of Douglass' autobiographical books.

According to Dr. John Stauffer, professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, McCune Smith was "well ahead of his time and he did not pander to the general public."[6] His erudite style and frequent use of foreign words was out of reach for many, including Douglass, who often did not grasp their meaning.

It is likely that McCune Smith's descendants, who were lighter in skin tone, followed the centuries-old practice of living and marrying "on the white side of the color line"[2] in order to escape racial prejudice. In an interesting twist of fate, only recently did Greta Blau, McCune Smith's great-great-great-granddaughter, make the connection with her ancestor while writing a term paper on the Colored Orphan Asylum for an African-American history course at Hunter College. She initially wondered whether this was the same man whose name was inscribed in the family Bible belonging to her 90-year-old grandmother. Her first response was, "But he was Black. I'm white."[7] After a slow process of checking censuses and cemetery records, when Blau got the last piece of information confirming her ancestry, she felt "disbelief, pride, excitement, confusion—it was like I had won the lottery."[8]

On a cold and rainy spring day in 2005, Blau visited Brooklyn's Cypress Hill Cemetery, the site of McCune Smith's grave, but was dismayed to discover only an old and nameless stone, lying face down in the turf of the family plot. In 2010, 145 years after his death, McCune Smith's descendants gathered at the site of his grave to dedicate a new tombstone in his honor. In the words of Greta Blau, "James McCune Smith is a name that every American ought to know, but few do."[2]

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