The Legacy of Dr. David Kearney McDonogh
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By Daniel Laroche, MD

David Kearney McDonogh was born into slavery in New Orleans in August 1821. He was considered the property of John McDonogh, arguably one of the wealthiest men in the South. John McDonogh was an active supporter of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and devised a scheme under which his slaves could purchase their freedom by working an extra day a week for ten years. The caveat—supported by a written contract—required that the “freed” slave then emigrate to Liberia. John McDonogh flouted Louisiana law, which prohibited teaching slaves to read and write ($10,000 fine and a year in jail), and bragged that the business of his plantations was completely run by his educated slaves. Eventually he decided to send two of his most talented slaves to Lafayette College in Pennsylvania in 1838 with a contract that upon graduation they would assume leadership roles in the newly minted republic of Liberia. David’s non-biological brother Washington McDonogh completed his courses as a teacher and emigrated to Liberia under the auspices of the ACS in 1842, with his family and 78 other freed slaves.

Life on the Lafayette College campus was difficult for David. He was taught and ate separately from his peers and suffered hostility from the college President. In spite of this, it was reported that David was a popular figure on campus. Eventually David expressed an interest in medicine and lobbied John McDonogh and the college president to take preliminary studies in medicine. John McDonogh expressed concerns regarding David’s commitment to leave for Liberia upon graduation, but he eventually relented and allowed David to study with Dr. Hugh Abernathy, a physician practicing in Easton, Pennsylvania. The experience solidified David’s desire to practice Medicine. David proved to be an exemplary student, graduating third in the class in 1844 as the College’s first black graduate.
After a tense standoff with John McDonogh, resulting in a final breach in their relationship, David secured admission to Columbia Physician and Surgeons (P&S) to attend lectures through the intervention of an esteemed alumnus, Dr. John Kearney Rodgers. In 1840 the President of Columbia P&S, Dr. John Augustine Smith, a staunch supporter the American Colonization Society stated “no diploma should be granted to a colored man.” Although P&S would not grant him a degree, the white medical community welcomed David as one of their own. David is the only slave to gain a professional medical education.

David claimed that he was a graduate of P&S without challenge from the school. He survived the New York City racial draft riots that led to unequivocal division between Blacks and Whites. David built a thriving practice on Sullivan Street in Manhattan, caring for both Black and White patients and joined Frederick Douglass in championing both the abolitionist movement and workers’ rights. After Dr. John Kearney Rodgers’ death in 1850, David honored his mentor by taking “Kearney” as his middle name.

Dr. John Kearney Rogers was a founder of the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary, the nation’s oldest specialty hospital, and appointed David to a staff position where he remained for eleven years, making him America’s first Black Eye/Otolaryngology (ENT) specialist.

The sculpture Transcendence, which stands adjacent to the David Bishop Skillman Library at Lafayette College, was created by renowned black sculptor Melvin Edwards to honor David McDonogh. Dedicated in September 2008, it is made of stainless steel and stands 16 feet tall. The massive upward-reaching form represents struggle, tension, and achievement.

David is buried, along with his family, in the historic Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

Dr. David Kearney McDonogh died in Elizabeth, New Jersey on January 19, 1893. Five years later, the McDonogh Memorial hospital opened at 439 West 41st Street in honor of his pioneering work. The hospital hired staff and admitted patients regardless of race. The hospital was the first medical institution with a charter to train Black women as nurses.
"Legacy" is an art piece dedicated to Dr. McDonogh by Lafayette Professor, Curlee Raven Holton. “The piece speaks to the importance of Lafayette’s African American alumni to the College and to the larger issues of educational opportunities locally and nationally”.

In 2016, Dr. Daniel Laroche, MD, an Ophthalmologist – President of Advanced Eye-Care of New York and the first African American glaucoma fellow to graduate from the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary, approached Dr. Esther R. Dyer, President & CEO National Medical Fellowships (NMF), to initiate the Dr. David Kearney McDonogh Scholarship in Ophthalmology/ENT. NMF embraced the remarkable story of David K. McDonogh and endeavored to share his exemplary professional and personal life with colleagues and medical students. Importantly, NMF initiated a program to support scholarships for research, innovation, and students’ aspirations towards excellence in medicine, specifically in careers in Ophthalmology and ENT. The scholarship program also reminds the Ophthalmology and ENT residency programs of the need for inclusion of Blacks, Afro-Latinos, and Native Americans to provide eye and otolaryngology care, as well to encourage participation in translational research and innovation.

Dr. Richard Koplin, an Ophthalmologist at New York Eye and Ear and a graduate of Lafayette College, helped to initiate the McDonogh Society at Lafayette College. Dr. Koplin has discussed David’s story at numerous institutions through his presentation “David K. McDonogh: A Transcendent Life.” In 2013 he introduced the story of Dr. McDonogh to Dr. Daniel Laroche, an Ophthalmologist affiliated with New York Eye and Ear, and Anthony Smith, then a college premedical student. Since there is no known picture of David Kearney McDonogh, Smith painted a tribute featuring a Black surgeon with the medical caduceus and eye as a tribute to Dr. McDonogh.

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Fitz Gerald Diala
4th Year MD Candidate
David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA

Fitz Gerald Diala is fourth-year medical student in the UCLA-Caltech Medical Scientist Training Program at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine. He earned his BS in Biochemistry from UC Riverside, graduating with Phi Beta Kappa and Rosemary S.J. Schaer Outstanding Senior honors. He completed his PhD in Molecular Biology under the guidance of Prof. Patricia J. Johnson, studying immune response to Trichomonas vaginalis and identifying the protein targets of metronidazole in the parasite. His commitment to mentorship and support of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds is longstanding. As an undergrad at University of California, Riverside (UCR), he was involved in African Americans United in Science, a student organization through which he organized tutoring at a local community center for K-6 children. Afterwards, he worked for the UCR Medical Scholars Program where he provided tutoring and mentorship support for pre-health students from underserved communities. At UCLA, his involvement has been most notable through the UCLA Premedical Enrichment Program and Re-Application Program, both of which cater to the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This year, Mr. Diala was selected for induction into the Gold Humanism Honors Society after completing his core clinical clerkships. His interest in ophthalmology has been affirmed by clinical and research experiences in the field, and he envisions a career focused on eliminating preventable blindness, especially in underserved communities. He is committed to continuing to mentor the next generation of aspiring physicians.
Rahilla Tarfa
4th Year MD Candidate
University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine

Born in Gainesville, GA and raised in Kano, Nigeria, Rahilla Tarfa is a 4th-year medical student at the University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine (Pitt Med) with a passion for advocacy, volunteerism, and biomedical research. In college, while obtaining a bachelor's in Bioinformatics and computational biology, she promoted school-wide concerns while serving as a Senator in the Student Government Association. During this time, she also developed a passion for biomedical research, and afterwards, pursued a Ph.D. in Neuroscience through the Brown-NIH Graduate Partnership Program. Here, she developed a desire to further apply her research work in alleviating human diseases and pursued a medical degree afterwards. At Pitt Med, she continued her advocacy as a member of the curriculum committee and co-host of The Pitt Med Radio Hour podcast, promoting student voices. She volunteered with the Guerilla Eye Service, promoting vision health among the underserved in Pittsburgh. As a volunteer with the Women's Clinic, she provided care to disenfranchised women, some of whom have escaped intimate partner violence. She also served as a first-year coordinator and member of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), contributing to fundraising efforts. As a second year, she served as a co-coordinator of the ENT student interest group, promoting visibility of the field among students. She currently serves as the Academic Affairs Co-Chair for SNMA Region VIII. Ms. Tarfa is currently engaged in biomedical research, working on screening novel compounds that could alleviate the burden of tinnitus, a disease that disproportionately affects veterans. In her spare time, she loves to watch movies and shows, spend time with friends and family, and write.
Martin Luther King stated “If a city has a 30% Negro population then it is logical to assume that Negroes should have at least 30% of the jobs in any particular company, and jobs in all categories not only in menial areas.” This still applies today. In New York City, the population of Blacks and Latinos are approximately 50%. There are no Black or Latino Chairs of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, and less than 2% of Ophthalmologist and Otolaryngologist physicians represent Blacks and Latinos. Major efforts, reform, and investment are needed to change this.

The founding committee members for the NMF scholarship are Ophthalmologists: Karen Allison MD, Ann Arthur-Andrew MD, MBA, Nneka O. Brooks MD, Jacqueline Busingye MD, Benjie Edghill MD, Rondai Evans MD, Chaneve Jeanniton MD, Daniel Laroche MD, John Mitchell MD, and Otolaryngologist, Dwayne Rollins MD. In 2018, we welcomed Melynnda Barnes MD, Tamiesha Frempong MD, and Brandon Johnson MD, to the committee. In 2019, we welcomed Ade Obayemi Jr. MD, and added the National Committee with Barry E. Breaux MD, David J. Brown MD, and Oswaldo A. Henriquez MD.

The Academic Advisory Board for 2019: are George A. Cioffi MD, Columbia University Medical College, Joel S. Schuman MD, New York University School of Medicine, and Dr. Michael Stewart MD, MPH, Cornell University School of Medicine.

All committee members are physicians of color who have benefitted from the excellence, persistence and pioneering efforts of Dr. David Kearney McDonogh, and who want to share that legacy with future Ophthalmologists and Otolaryngologists and with all Americans. The committee is thankful to Dr. Esther R. Dyer, President & CEO National Medical Fellowships and NMF staff for their support in establishing and administering this Scholarship.

The story of Dr. McDonogh continues. Since this Scholarship was founded in spring 2018, Columbia P&S awarded Dr. David Kearney McDonogh an honorary medical degree that was received by his great granddaughter Pat Worthy. This honorary degree finally acknowledges his medical training at Columbia University nearly 178 years earlier. The American Academy of Ophthalmology has also started a Minority Ophthalmology Mentoring Program (MOM) to address the ongoing health disparities in Ophthalmology and lack of minority Ophthalmologist representation.

National Medical Fellowships is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the number of underrepresented minority physicians and other professionals in the healthcare workforce in order to improve access to quality healthcare in medically underserved communities. NMF also wants to thank you and all of its sponsors.
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On the Cover
A Tribute to David Kearny McDonogh, MD (1821-1893)

On August 13, 2020 the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary unveiled a portrait of David Kearny McDonogh, MD, in the facility’s new waiting room as part of a permanent display honoring both his legacy and contributions to the hospital. The work was created by renowned artist Leroy Campbell, and was commissioned and donated by Daniel Laroche, MD, and his wife Marjorie. Dr. James Tsai the President of New York Eye and Ear Infirmary with site Chair Dr. Paul Sidoti and Vice Chair of Diversity and Inclusion Tameisha Frempong, Dr. Daniel Laroche, Dr. George Wanna Site Chair of Otolaryngology at NYII, Dr. Douglas Buxton, Dr. Richard Rosen Director of Retina, Dr. Paul Lee are seen in the photo.

If you were not able to contribute, or to contribute for next year’s Dr. David K. McDonogh Scholarship fund you can still donate here

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