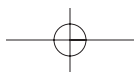
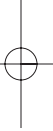
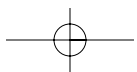
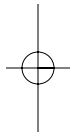
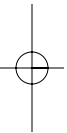
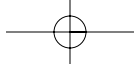


PART ONE



THE  
EARLY YEARS





DR. JAMES  
DURHAM

(1762-?)



James Durham of New Orleans, Louisiana, the first black doctor in the United States, hurried through the streets of Philadelphia, eager to meet Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the foremost medical man of his day, was just as eager to meet the twenty-six-year-old African American.

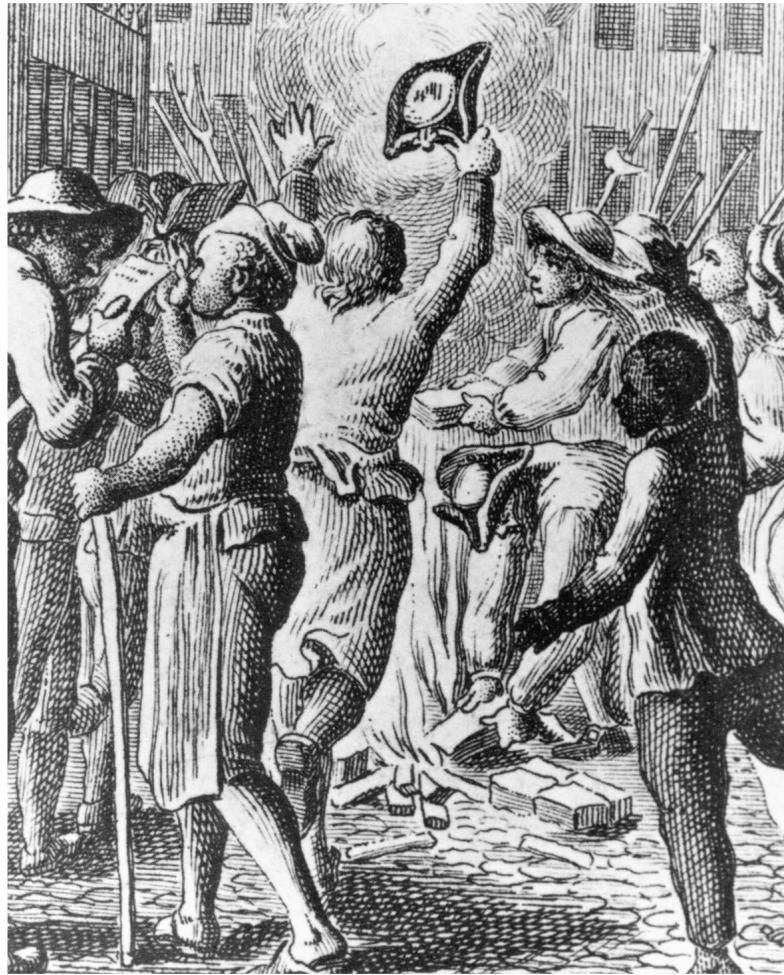
Although Dr. Durham had only been fourteen years old when Dr. Rush had signed the Declaration of Independence, the younger man's reputation for healing was now well known. And Dr. Rush had an urgent problem. How could he keep more people from dying in the terrible diphtheria epidemic that was sweeping the city of Philadelphia?

The epidemic of diphtheria had killed 119 people in Philadelphia in a single day. Physicians looked on helplessly as patients died from the dreaded disease. Rush had already lost his sister and three pupils. Doctor Durham, however, had developed a successful treatment for diphtheria.

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◆ During an **epidemic**, a disease spreads quickly and affects many people at one time.

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Benjamin Rush wanted to learn how Durham had saved so many people. Perhaps Dr. Durham's knowledge could help him stop the diphtheria epidemic.

Like other members of the black population, Durham was struggling to make a place for himself in the new nation. He had been born in Philadelphia, but the place Durham (sometimes spelled Derham) was trying to make was unusual for anyone in those times, and especially for a black man: He was struggling for acceptance as a doctor.

Durham had been born into slavery, but he had learned to read and write. Like most doctors in this country, he had learned his profession by studying under other doctors. While still a small child, he was put to work mixing medicines by a physician who bought him from another slave owner. At age eleven, Durham was bought by yet another doctor, who taught him to perform "some of the more humble acts of attention to his patients."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, when he was twenty-one, the determined Durham managed to buy his freedom and begin his own medical practice in New Orleans. His fluency in French, Spanish, and English made him one of that city's most popular doctors, and he soon became one of its most distinguished ones as well.

Durham finally met Rush on that day in 1788, and gave him such good information that Rush ended up reading the young man's paper on diphtheria before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. "I have conversed with him upon most of the acute and epidemic diseases of the country where he lives," Rush said later, "and was pleased to find him perfectly acquainted with the modern simple mode of practice in those diseases. I expected to have suggested some new medicines to him, but he suggested many more to me."<sup>2</sup>

Durham returned to New Orleans in 1789. There, he managed to save the lives of more yellow fever victims than most doctors of his

time, losing only eleven of sixty-four patients during an epidemic that raged through New Orleans.

Only three years later, however, the city of New Orleans limited his work because he did not have a formal medical degree. He

## AFRICAN KNOW-HOW

Several decades before Rush and Durham met, the most important medical discovery in Colonial America was contributed by a black man. The man's name was Onesimus, a young African held as a slave by the Puritan clergyman Cotton Mather.

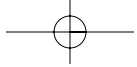
During one of the periodic smallpox epidemics that swept the colonies, Onesimus told Mather “. . . Cut the Skin, and put in a drop . . . no body have Small Pox any more.”<sup>3</sup> He then showed Mather the scar he had received.

Traditional healers in Africa had apparently used smallpox inoculations for centuries, injecting a mild case of the disease as a protection against a fatal attack.

Mather published the information he had received from Onesimus in *Some Account of What Is Said of Inoculating or Transplanting the Small Pox*, in 1721. This was almost thirty years before Edward Jenner, the Englishman who is credited with developing the smallpox vaccine, was born. Mather was greeted with ridicule by most of the leading physicians of his time when he urged them to test the method described by Onesimus.

But a doctor named Zabdiel Boylston tried it on his son and two of his slaves during an epidemic that swept Boston that same year. When it worked on them, Boylston inoculated another 241 people. Only 6 later caught smallpox. (Thomas Jefferson tested a smallpox vaccine many years later by injecting it into 200 slaves, including 80 of his own. When none of them died, whites allowed themselves to be injected.)

The method Onesimus passed on to Boylston was also used to inoculate American soldiers during the Revolutionary War, saving many of them from the ravages of smallpox.



continued to write to Dr. Rush, but today no one knows what happened to Dr. Durham after 1802. Despite his achievements, the idea that black people were incapable of understanding medicine remained widespread in the decades to come. In the face of often incredible odds, however, many African American men and women wrote their names into history as outstanding doctors, nurses, and researchers.

