



Ashmun, J. J. H. Young, A. Finley. Map of the West Coast of Africa from Sierra Leone to Cape Palmas, including the colony of Liberia. [Philadelphia Pa.: A. Finley, 1830] Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/96680499/.

The Colony of Liberia extends from the Territory of Kroo Setra, a distance of about 280 miles from 20 to 340 miles inland, in some places much more; it includes within its Jurisdiction, the territories of several native tribes, the names of which are as follows: the Feys or Veys occupy the country from Gallinas R. to Little Cape Mount, a distance of about 50 miles along the coast, and 25 to 30 miles inland; they are an active warlike and proud people. Population 12,000 to 15,000. The Dey Tribe extends from Little Cape Mount to Mesurado river about 30 miles in length, and 12 to 16 miles inland; an indolent & inoffensive people. Pop. 6,000 to 8,000

\*The territory, at present under the actual jurisdiction of the Colony, extends from Granby Cape Mount, to Trade Town, a distance of about 150 miles.

numbers about 125,000 souls. The country abounds in rice, oil and cattle, and rivals in fertility any part of the African coast. At a distance of from 30 to 50 miles inland, a belt of dense and almost impassable forest occurs along the whole of this coast, of from one to two days journey in breadth, which nearly prevents all intercourse between the maritime and interior tribes, and is one of the principal causes why the inland parts of this section of Africa are so entirely unknown to the civilised world.

The Pissou River has been traced 100 miles from the sea, and affords a safe navigation of 15 days sail.

MAP  
of the  
WEST COAST OF AFRICA,  
from  
SIERRA LEONE to CAPE PALMAS  
including the Colony  
OF  
**LIBERIA:**  
Compiled chiefly  
from the  
SURVEYS and OBSERVATIONS  
OF THE  
LATE REV. J. ASHMUN.

J. H. Young, Sc.

Windsor St. Jul  
This may certify that Mr.  
been for the last eighteen months  
of medicine with me, and  
he has applied himself to  
aviduity which does him  
credit —

Windsor St. Sept 7th 18  
This may certify that Mr. Samuel I  
attended to the study of the Latin Language  
under my tuition —  
Edw. E. C.



# Crit and Determination

**American-born and raised in Liberia,  
Samuel Ford McGill—Class of 1839—was the first  
black graduate of a U.S. medical school.**

*by Susan Green*

On Monday, December 12, 1836, medical students at Washington Medical College in Baltimore, Maryland, gathered to discuss their anxiety about a fellow classmate. They recently learned that the faculty of the college,

*"... permitted the introduction of a Negro boy into the institution as a student, for the purpose of instruction, and have entitled him to all the rights and privileges of the College."*

Expressing their concerns further in a letter to Dr. Samuel K. Jennings, dean of the medical college, they argued,

*"... any persons who possess any degree of self esteem cannot conceive that the faculty would consent that students of fair complexion should mingle with those of dark skin." And further said, "... this Boy has gone far beyond the limited space granted to him and has encroached as far upon the privilege enjoyed by the students as to wound their feeling, and disgust them by his actions."*

**THIS GROUP OF 12 BELIEVED** if this person continued attending lectures it would jeopardize their own professional prospects and endanger the college. They pointed to undisclosed prejudicial reports to contend that once word got out that they had graduated on equal terms with a man of African descent, they would not be able to practice medicine in a slave state.

The controversial classmate in question was Samuel Ford McGill, who two years later would graduate from Dartmouth's then medical department, becoming the first black man to receive an MD degree from an American

medical school. David J. Peck, MD, is commonly credited with being the first American-born black to graduate from a U.S. medical school, Rush Medical College, but McGill predates him by eight years and another Dartmouth medical student, George Torrance Gilliam, Class of 1841, by six years.

## **EARLY 19TH CENTURY MEDICAL EDUCATION**

An apprenticeship system of training doctors remained in favor up until the late 18th century, but efforts were underway to formalize American medical education. Physicians interested in establishing a medical school,

either approached an existing local academic institution seeking permission to grant degrees under its auspices or sought licensing from the state to create an independent institution authorized to award a medical degree. As a result of these early efforts, medical schools nominally connected with academic institutions began popping-up in metropolitan areas, but medical education could not yet claim the high standards of their sponsoring institutions.

Washington Medical College was typical of most early 19th century medical schools. Denied a charter from Maryland in 1826, the founding



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physicians turned to Washington College in Washington, Pennsylvania to establish a medical school in their name in Baltimore—permission granted, the new medical school accepted students the following year.

Often ill-prepared, students learned from a faculty of local physicians. Clinical instruction was offered through informal lectures and anatomical dissection was observed, rather than taught—hands-on clinical experience was rare. Medical education lasted nearly one year and culminated with students presenting an acceptable thesis and passing a comprehensive examination.

A few years prior to the founding of Washington Medical College, the American Colonization Society (ACS), also known as the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color in the United States, founded Liberia on Africa's west coast in 1821. Viewed as a remedy to slavery and a solution to the increasing racial tension in the U.S.—due to the rapidly growing free-born black and freed slave populations—the ACS, with a presence in each state, induced free blacks to emigrate to Africa and settle in Monrovia, the colony's main settlement.

Maryland broke away from the ACS in 1827 to form the Maryland State Colonization Society (MSCS) in order to independently establish their own settlement—Maryland in Liberia, which they did in 1834, farther south in Cape Palmas.

Although Baltimore was home to America's largest free black population within a slave state, freed and freeborn blacks still faced widespread racial

discrimination. The McGill's, a freeborn black American family living in the city, were among Maryland's early Liberian settlers—first in Monrovia then later in Cape Palmas. Though born into slavery then freed, the family patriarch, George, a successful lay Methodist minister and teacher, was one of Baltimore's most prominent and prosperous black citizens. His decision to relocate his family stemmed from his connection to leaders of the colonization movement who assured him of a high-ranking position within the colonial administration, which he received. Once settled, McGill achieved prominence, he was Vice Agent of the colony for one year, superintendent of schools, and a wealthy merchant. His son-in-law, John Brown Russwurm, became the colony's first black governor.

Befitting his social status, George's eldest son Samuel was committed to becoming a physician. Doctors in the new colony were predominantly white, such as James Hall, a born-and-bred New Englander and Maryland in Liberia's first governor who became the young man's mentor. It was from this position of colonial prominence that Samuel McGill wrote to a former member of the MSCA Board of Governors—Moses Sheppard, a Quaker merchant and philanthropist in Baltimore and personal acquaintance of McGill's father—in fall of 1835 requesting assistance in securing and paying for his medical education with the promise of returning to the Liberian colony to practice medicine.

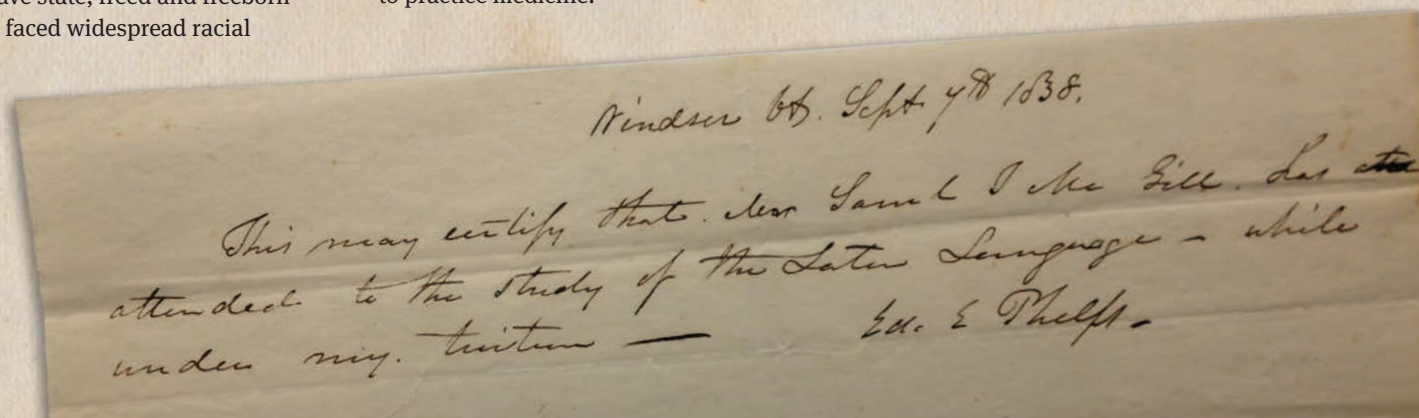


Samuel F. McGill's mentor, Reuben Dimond Mussey, MD, professor and chair of anatomy and surgery in Dartmouth's medical department. Courtesy of Henry R. Winkler Center for the History of the Health Professions, University of Cincinnati Libraries.

Soon after receiving the letter, Sheppard enlisted a network of support for McGill. A group of white colonizationists met with Sheppard, found the prospect of educating a settler to serve as a colonial physician appealing, and secured a position for the young man at Washington Medical College. The MSCA agreed to pay his tuition, several doctors agreed to supply his textbooks, and Sheppard would bear the cost of transportation and take McGill into his home.

Yet one detail loomed.

Because this was McGill's first visit to the U.S. since leaving in his youth, Sheppard worried the Liberian was ill-prepared for American racism.



Edward E. Phelps, MD, confirming that under his tutelage Samuel F. McGill studied "the Latin Language," which though not required in medical training, was helpful to know. (Dartmouth archives)



Quick to apprise young McGill of what awaited him in the southern city, Sheppard wrote:

“You must not expect to hear the term Mr. McGill from a white man,” he warned. “In the College you must appear as a servant; there is not a medical school in the U. States into which you could be admitted in any other character.”

McGill accepted this grim reality.

He traveled to Baltimore and began attending lectures in November 1836. By December, his classmates had organized a protest and demanded his expulsion. Though McGill had been instructed to appear as a servant, the school’s white students expected the freeborn and proud Liberian to behave as a servant as well.

Predictably, this experiment didn’t end well—McGill was expelled before year’s end.

### NEW ENGLAND AND DARTMOUTH

Determined to continue his support of McGill, Sheppard again enlisted his network of like-minded friends and colleagues to find a new medical college for the aspiring physician.

Edward E. Phelps, MD, a professor of anatomy and surgery in the University of Vermont’s medical department and highly regarded by his students, agreed to accept the Liberian as a private student in Windsor, Vermont, where McGill would have access to Phelps’s personal laboratory. Although McGill would be an apprentice, Phelps assured the MSCS he would be taught the medical curriculum of the university and attend some of its lectures—a proposed course of study considered advanced for its time.

But before McGill departed for Vermont he was again cautioned. This time by MSCS agent Ira Easter:

“In regard to your general deportment to all classes of society your residence in Africa and in this country, cannot fail to have taught you, that prudence and circumspection are particularly needed in the present excited state of the public mind, in regard to the African race. You must not forget for a moment, that you are an African in America; and in that relation whatever may be your sense of equality with your fellow men, remember, it will be dangerous to show it.”

Armed with this knowledge, McGill traveled to Windsor in early winter of 1837. At the request of his new teacher he traveled in the company of two deceased males—



While no photos of Samuel McGill could be located, photos of his brothers exist, including Uriah A. McGill (above), in this photo taken by Augustus Washington. (Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/2004664344/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2004664344/).)

Phelps had recommended to the MSCS that McGill bring cadavers up from Baltimore. Necessary for teaching, cadavers were difficult to come by in rural areas. And Phelps, like many rural physicians with an apprenticeship, needed cadavers to stock his dissecting room. At that time medical schools also faced difficulty procuring cadavers.

Soon after his arrival, McGill met with Phelps then took up residence with a nearby “negro family.” Respectfully accepted into the local community, he began his medical education.

Studious and eager, he embraced the study of anatomy—over the course of a few months McGill spent five hours each day in Phelps’s dissecting room. In a letter to Easter chronicling McGill’s progress, Phelps wrote that in five months his apprentice, “...exceeded what most medical students com-

plete in six.” When Phelps resigned from the University of Vermont in July of that year and returned to private practice (a few years later he would become chair of Theory and Practice of Medicine and Pathanatomy at Dartmouth), his tutelage of McGill ceased. As was customary at the time, Phelps assured McGill he would issue a certificate accrediting him as a physician. But McGill believed he needed a medical degree to give him legitimate standing in Liberia.

Phelps called upon his friend Reuben Dimond Mussey, MD, a professor and chair of anatomy and surgery in Dartmouth’s medical department, for help in admitting McGill to the college. Mussey was an admired teacher and independent-minded researcher who successfully challenged prevailing medical notions. A Dartmouth College graduate, Class of 1803, his long career with the insti-



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tution spanned nearly 40 years and served as an important bridge between the fledgling medical school's Nathan Smith era and a more progressive curriculum.

Dartmouth Medical School's founding in 1797, as a medical department within the college, was no different than that of other medical schools at that time, yet by the early 1800s the school had gained a reputation for its teaching method and scientific approach to medicine. Nathan Smith, MD, a well-educated physician with a solo practice treating residents in the rural Upper Connecticut River Valley, knew that good patient care required better-educated doctors. He envisioned establishing a medical school in Hanover to share his expertise and his approach to patient-centered care—when Smith approached Dartmouth College's Board of Trustees seeking permission to do so under Dartmouth's auspices, the trustees accepted his offer.

Though located in the remote northern New England wilderness, the medical school was among the first to offer a distinct medical curriculum—Dartmouth is the nation's fourth-oldest medical school. In collaboration with

the ACS, Dartmouth was among a handful of northeastern medical schools willing to accept qualified students from Liberia. In this aspect, the college was also far ahead of others in admitting men of color to its baccalaureate program—an affirmation of its continued commitment to minority students today. Edward Mitchell, Dartmouth Class of 1828, graduated 42 years prior to other Ivy League schools accepting and graduating men of color.

Under Mussey's wing, McGill was introduced to classmates as a native African—as such, he was accorded the respect shown to foreigners rather than the suspicion directed at black Americans.

Known for his intellect and gentility, McGill did well at Dartmouth. But at the beginning of his final term, with graduation imminent, he believed he needed to acquire clinical experience in order to properly care for the colonists. Before returning to Liberia, McGill wrote to the MSCS asking permission to extend his stay in America. He planned to spend time in Baltimore conducting clinical work among the city's black community.



The Old Medical School Building is where McGill would have taken most of his medical courses at Dartmouth. (Dartmouth College archives)

His request was denied.

Passing all examinations and successfully defending his medical thesis, McGill graduated with an MD degree and honors in June of 1839. During his entire time at Dartmouth, he never revealed he was born in America.

After leaving the college, and a short stay with Sheppard in Baltimore, he returned to Cape Palmas and became the colony's first doctor of African descent. During the following decade McGill mentored and trained several young colonists

Windsor St. July. 30<sup>th</sup> 1838,

This may certify that Mr. Samuel F. McGill has been for the last eighteen months engaged in the study of medicine with me, and I may add that, he has applied himself to his studies with an assiduity which does him the greatest degree of credit—  
Edward E. Phelps, M.D.

A certificate issued by Edward E. Phelps, MD, accrediting his apprentice, Samuel F. McGill. (Dartmouth archives)



in medicine—among them was Dempsey R. Fletcher, Class of 1847. Though not trained by McGill, Daniel Laing, Jr., Class of 1854, and John Anthony Parm, Class of 1871, became the third and fourth Liberians, respectively, to graduate from Dartmouth's medical school.

Forrester “Woody” Lee, MD, D ’68, a professor of medicine at Yale School of Medicine and co-author with James Pringle D ’58, of *A Noble and Independent Course, The Life of the Reverend Edward Mitchell*, the story of Dartmouth's first black graduate, has long been researching the history of African Americans at the college.

“Though his story is mostly unknown, Samuel McGill is important to the thinly documented history of free blacks in the pre-Civil War era. American born, he returned from Africa as an educated man of color prepared to challenge prejudicial racial attitudes arrayed against free blacks,” Lee says. “McGill is an example of the success that lies ahead when individuals are measured for their true worth.”

That McGill achieved a medical education at a time when American-born blacks were largely prevented from attending established colleges due to racial discrimination, is as much a Liberian story as an American one—his success required him to navigate complex and evolving racial dynamics on both sides of the Atlantic. As a colonizer, he was able to circumvent American racial attitudes and reinvent himself—helping him secure the support of influential patrons such as Sheppard.

Over time, McGill achieved prominence and financial success in Maryland in Liberia, both in politics, becoming Assistant Agent of the colony in 1848, then in the family business. All the while he corresponded with his patron—keeping him abreast of Liberian progress. Sheppard responded to his protégé in kind by sending medical books and supplies.

In 1851, Sheppard was pleased to learn McGill, had been appointed governor of Maryland in Liberia.

After leaving government at the end of his term in 1854, he joined two of his brothers to found McGill Brothers Trading, then moved his family from Cape Palmas to Monrovia to further the company's business interests. Successful merchants, the McGill family was among the prominent and influential early settler families in Liberia. McGill died on June 28, 1871 in Monrovia.

*Samuel F. McGill's story would not be told without the extensive knowledge and generosity of Robert Murray, assistant professor of history at Mercy College and author of the forthcoming book, Atlantic Passages; Constance E. Putnam, author of The Science We Have Loved and Taught—Dartmouth Medical School's First Two Centuries; and Forrester “Woody” Lee, MD, D ’68, who developed and manages the Blacks at Dartmouth History website.*

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK ALUMNI OF DARTMOUTH—1775-1950

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### African Americans @ Dartmouth College 1775-1950

#### Dartmouth Black Students From The 18<sup>th</sup> To Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century

##### First Ivy League College Black Graduates

During the time of American slavery, only Dartmouth and a few other colleges opened doors to men of African descent. **Caleb Watts**, raised as a slave, was tutored in 1774-75 by Dartmouth's founder, Rev. Eleazer Wheelock at Moor's Charity School, a forerunner of the College. **Prince Saunders**, son of a freed slave, studied at Moor's in 1808 before emigrating to Haiti to counsel the republic's leaders. In 1828 **Edward Mitchell** earned a bachelor's degree, 42 years before other Ivy League schools graduated self-identified men of color.

*Prince Saunders 1808*

##### Before the Civil Rights Era

By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century **137 black men** had attended Dartmouth College and Medical School, the second largest to enroll in a New England college. As trailblazers they broke new ground across diverse paths. Black students on campus were successful as scholars and scholar-athletes. Nineteen percent of graduates of the College earned **Phi Beta Kappa honors**. After college most entered the professions, one-half as **physicians** and one-fourth as **educators**, while others became leading citizens across the nation.

*Matthew H. Bullock 1904*

##### Before the Civil War

Before 1865 Dartmouth educated **twenty black men** at the College and Medical School. Fifteen joined free blacks as **Liberian colonists**. Liberia's first black physician, **Samuel F. McGill** (DMS 1837), and first black lawyer, **Edward G. Draper** (DC 1855), were Dartmouth men. Other black graduates labored to secure rights on American soil. **Thomas Paul, Jr.** (DC 1841) and **Jonathan C. Gibbs** (DC 1852) joined abolitionist movements. **William B. Ellis** (DMS 1858) served as an assistant surgeon in the Civil War and later on the medical staff of Freedman's Hospital.

*Edward G. Draper 1854*

##### Legacy of Dartmouth's Early Black Alumni

The historical black alumni of Dartmouth, although present in small numbers on the campus at any given time, established a collective legacy that is foundational. Among them were **Ernest E. Just** (DC 1906), the Black Apollo of Science, and many other prominent men recognized today for their sterling accomplishments. They came to Dartmouth from rural byways and crowded urban streets to inscribe their mark on the institution of the granite state. Today more than 4000 Dartmouth black alumni – men and women – stand on the shoulders of Dartmouth's early black alumni.

*Ernest E. Just 1906*

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**“In researching the history of blacks at Dartmouth, I recognized an untold Dartmouth family story—it has fallen to this generation of black alumni/ae to discover and interpret the history of our forebearers. Between 1824 and 1950, before the civil rights era, 131 men of African descent became alumni of the College and medical school, the second-largest number of blacks to enroll in an Ivy League school. Their dreams and aspirations were honored despite the racial biases and politics that even today continue to inflame passions. Dartmouth's record on the American race question is arguably unique and distinguished among American colleges and universities.”**

**-Forrester “Woody” Lee, MD, D ’68**

Lee developed and manages the Blacks at Dartmouth History website, [badahistory.net](http://badahistory.net), featuring profiles of graduates; a gallery of photos; a list of graduates searchable by profession, honors, and geography among other categories; and biographical sources.

It is here where readers learn Dartmouth was one of the earliest American colleges in the 19th century accepting people of African descent and meet Caleb Watts, its first graduate—raised a slave and tutored by the College's founder, Rev. Eleazer Wheelock at Moor's Charity School, forerunner of the College—and the medical school's Samuel F. McGill.

The historical black alumni of Dartmouth came to Hanover from both rural and urban environments to make their mark. Today, more than 4,000 Dartmouth black alumni—men and women—stand on the shoulders of Dartmouth's early black alumni.

SUSAN GREEN