

Dr. James Durham, Mysterious Eighteenth-Century Black Physician: Man or Myth?

LITTLE is known about him, not even the year of his birth for certain, though it is believed to be 1762, while the date of his death is even more elusive. No record of it has been found. Yet, James Durham, who was born a slave in Philadelphia, has been called America's first black physician;¹ for several years he practiced medicine in New Orleans; and he was a friend and correspondent of Benjamin Rush, America's best-known physician and medical scientist of that day. But John Duffy, a leading authority on the history of medicine, and the acknowledged authority on the history of medicine in Louisiana, has bluntly written: "This illustrious black physician may have practiced in Philadelphia or in some other city—but not in New Orleans."² Duffy bases this statement upon the fact that Spanish records for the period when Durham was in New Orleans make no mention of a Dr. Durham, and the Spanish were very meticulous about the examination and licensing of physicians. On the other hand, Duffy concedes that those same records do mention "a free black called 'Derum,' " who, not having completed the regular examinations, had "the right only to cure throat disease and no other."³

It is true that down through the years the story of this black

¹ See, e.g., Richard Bardolph, *The Negro Vanguard* (New York, 1961), 30, and Peter M. Bergman, *The Chronological History of the Negro in America* (New York, 1969), 41. But according to *The Ebony Handbook*, by the Editors of *Ebony* (Chicago, 1974), 361, the honor of being the first black physician in America belongs to Lucas Santomee of New York, who reportedly studied in Holland and practiced in New York under both the Dutch and English. In 1667 the English gave him a grant of land for his services.

² John Duffy, *The Healers: The Rise of the Medical Establishment* (New York, 1976), 284.

³ *Ibid.*, 285.

man in Louisiana medicine—be he “Derum,” “Derham” (as the name is usually but erroneously spelled), or “Durham” (the correct spelling)—has probably been exaggerated, especially regarding his abilities as a linguist and his “thriving, biracial practice,” but it seems unnecessarily harsh and unfair to conclude, as Duffy does: “Obviously the story of James Derham is a myth based upon garbled versions of the activities of the free black Derum. Unfortunately, so many historians have quoted each other about Dr. James Derham that now he is firmly established as an historical ‘fact.’”⁴

James Durham is not a myth; he did practice medicine in New Orleans. In all likelihood, the free Negro Derum, referred to in the Spanish records, and Durham are one and the same person; the error in spelling is that of the Spanish. In proof of his New Orleans practice there are ten letters he wrote to Benjamin Rush over a period of a dozen years. From the content of some of these, it is clear that Rush communicated with Durham; unfortunately Rush’s letter books contain no copies of that correspondence.⁵

But it is not this correspondence between a former slave and one of the most famous Americans of the eighteenth century that assured Durham his place in history, albeit a questionable place according to John Duffy. It is, rather—and not surprisingly—a public statement by Rush himself, made before the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery on November 14, 1788. The statement was in the form of a letter in response to the request of a group of London abolitionists for his findings on the intelligence of blacks.⁶ Virtually all else that has been hitherto written on Durham is largely based upon this letter, so that without it there would have been no Dr. James Durham in written history. Durham’s letters to Rush partly flesh out their relationship. Covering the years 1789–1802, the letters, when they cease, cause Durham to disappear. His name is not listed in the New Orleans city direc-

⁴ *Ibid.* See also John Duffy, ed., *The Rudolph Matas History of Medicine in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1958–62), I, 324–325, for substantially the same information, in somewhat briefer form, on Durham as noted above in Duffy’s *The Healers*.

⁵ Durham’s letters to Rush are in the Library Company of Philadelphia Rush Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶ Betty L. Plummer, “Benjamin Rush and the Negro,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 127, pt. 2 (December, 1970), 796.

tories for 1805 (the first one), and 1822; nor is it included in the manuscript census of 1810 (the first census taken by the United States in the territory obtained from France in 1803), or in those of 1820 and 1830. He may, therefore, have died before 1805. There also remains the distinct possibility that Durham left New Orleans during or shortly after 1802; there are two events which serve to fuel that speculation. One, on May 20, 1800, Durham wrote to Rush inquiring if Rush thought he might find "a heven [*haven*] in Philadelphia, for I want to leave New Orleans and come and live in the States."⁷ And two, in 1801, the Spanish authorities barred five white doctors from further practice of medicine in Louisiana, while a free Negro named "Derum" was left with "the right only to cure throat disease and no other."⁸ Throat diseases were Durham's "specialty." If the Spanish misspelled his name as "Derum," Rush did not do much better, rendering it as "Derham." If Durham did move to Philadelphia, that fact could explain the absence of correspondence with Rush after 1802, as there he could have conversed with Rush directly. But Durham's name does not appear in the Philadelphia city directories for 1803-1805, 1810, and 1816.

Today, the name Durham, or Derham, is a common one in both New Orleans and Philadelphia, while the mystery remains of what happened to James Durham, eighteenth-century black physician. Until he vanished from history in Spanish-held Louisiana, his life was one of remarkable achievement, from slave to practicing free black physician and correspondent with one of America's leading eighteenth-century figures.

Durham may have taken his name from his original Philadelphia owner. While still a boy, he was sold to Dr. John Kearsley, Jr., a Philadelphia authority on "sore throat distempers," the same "specialty" that Durham later followed.⁹ Kearsley was also an opponent of the practice of venesection, or bleeding, which brought him into conflict with Benjamin Rush, one of the last leading proponents of that useless and enervating treatment.¹⁰ Somewhere

⁷ Durham to Rush, May 20, 1800, Rush Papers.

⁸ Duffy, *The Healers*, 285.

⁹ Herbert M. Morais, *The History of the Negro in Medicine* (New York, [1969]), 9.

¹⁰ M. O. Bousfield, "An Account of Physicians of Color in the United States," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XVII (1945), 64.

along the way, Durham learned to read and write, but whether he did so before or after he was acquired by Kearsley, is not known. However, it was Kearsley who introduced him to medicine by teaching him the principles of pharmacy and by allowing him to assist with the treatment of patients.¹¹

The outbreak of the Revolution found Kearsley a confirmed Tory, one who was carted through the streets of Philadelphia by his Patriot neighbors in the summer of 1775. Then, when it was alleged that he was engaged in active cooperation with the British, he was arrested and thrown into prison, where he went insane and died at Carlisle in 1777.¹²

Durham, who was only about fifteen years old at the time of Kearsley's death, then supposedly passed through the hands of several masters before he was acquired by Dr. George West, surgeon of the 16th British Regiment, under whom he continued his training as a sort of "physician's assistant," picking up knowledge by precept and example. At the end of the Revolution, Durham was sold once more, this time to Dr. Robert Dow (not Dove as usually stated) of New Orleans.¹³ Dow was apparently a kind and compassionate man who not only continued Durham's medical training but became a genuine friend as well, and freed him "for the cash sum of five hundred pesos" in 1783.¹⁴

Durham then commenced his own practice in New Orleans. He married, and Rush noted, upon first meeting him, that he spoke French fluently and had some command of Spanish. He is said to have had patients of both races. By 1788, at the age of twenty-six, he was reportedly making the equivalent of \$3,000 a year.¹⁵ It was also in 1788 that he returned to Philadelphia and met Dr. Rush.

¹¹ Harold E. Farmer, "An Account of the Earliest Colored Gentlemen in Medical Science in the United States," *ibid.*, VIII (1940), 602; Kelly Miller, "The Historic Background of the Negro Physician," *Journal of Negro History*, I (1916), 103.

¹² Morais, *The Negro in Medicine*, 9; *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, Lyman H. Butterfield, ed. (Princeton, 1951), I, 498.

¹³ Miller, "The Negro Physician," 103; Duffy, *The Healers*, 285.

¹⁴ Charles B. Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature* (New Orleans, 1937), 51; George W. Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (New York, 1883), I, 401.

¹⁵ Miller, "The Negro Physician," 103; Morais, *The Negro in Medicine*, 10; *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, I, 497.

Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) had been born just outside Philadelphia at Byberry, and received his education at Princeton and the University of Edinburgh. He lectured and wrote on chemistry, was a member of the Second Continental Congress, and signed the Declaration of Independence. Later in the war he served briefly as Surgeon General of the Middle Department. After the Revolution he established the Philadelphia Dispensary, the first free dispensary in the new nation. Then, beginning in 1792, he taught medicine and clinical practice at the University of Pennsylvania, and helped to make its medical school the best in the United States. Unfortunately, Rush stubbornly persisted in bloodletting as a general and often-used practice, even after most reputable physicians came to realize its futility, and even the harm it caused. On the other hand, he completed some of the earliest clinical work on mental disorders, thus making him, it is sometimes said, the “father of American psychiatry.” He described this work in *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812).

Rush’s interests knew no narrow medical bounds, either intellectually or socially; he was a classic example of the true humanitarian—interested alike in penal reform, education (especially education for women), and the abolition of slavery. When he was only twenty-eight years old, he was writing pamphlets in opposition to slavery. Unlike so many abolitionists, however, Rush’s interest in the Negro did not cease with the end of enslavement, since he was active as a trusted advisor and counselor in the establishment of African churches in Philadelphia.¹⁶

His chief contribution to improving the lot of blacks was probably “his emphasis upon the ill effects of slavery on the black mind.”¹⁷ Far ahead of his time, Rush argued that, so intellectually enervating was slavery, one could not talk about the “intelligence of Africans” if his only familiarity was with African slaves, and not with free Africans in Africa as well. He wrote medical articles on the “cultural shock” experienced by their arrival in the New World as slaves, and of the insanity caused by enslavement, while he saw in their songs and dances not joy and contentment, but rather the “physical symp-

¹⁶ Plummer, “Benjamin Rush and the Negro,” 794. See also, Donald J. D’Elia, “Dr. Benjamin Rush and the Negro,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXX (1969), 413–422.

¹⁷ Plummer, “Benjamin Rush and the Negro,” 797.

toms" of melancholy. With somewhat less scientific basis, but in a boundless spirit of the brotherhood of man, Rush also wrote of his belief that the Negro's blackness was caused by a leprous condition, which, if it could be controlled and Negroes made white, would enhance the oneness and the brotherhood of man.¹⁸

On November 14, 1788, as previously mentioned, Rush submitted a letter to the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, which he later served as president. Shortly before, he had somehow met Durham, who only recently had returned to Philadelphia for the first time since he was last sold there as a slave. Rush told the Society members:

There is now in this city a black man of the name of James Derham, a practitioner of physic, belonging to the Spanish settlement of New Orleans on the Mississippi. . . .

I have conversed with him upon most of the acute and epidemic diseases of the country where he lives, 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.

Rush related the story of Durham's life as slave apprentice to at least three physicians, and informed the audience that Durham, who had never joined any church, had that very day been baptized and received into the Episcopal Church.¹⁹

When Durham returned to New Orleans he wisely chose to remain in contact with his eminent new friend and benefactor, and first wrote to him in May 1789. His handwriting is generally neat with well- and clearly-formed letters and a few flourishes of the pen at the beginning or ending of some words. His sentences, however, run on with little or no, or meaningless, punctuation together with inconsistent capitalization, while the spelling is generally poor, though perfectly phonetic.

The first letter is quite obsequious in tone, with Durham verbally "bowing and scraping" before the great man who had befriended him. He thanked Rush for his many kindnesses and favors, and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 794-795.

¹⁹ *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, I, 497.

expressed the strong desire not only to improve himself in the practice of medicine, but also to be worthy of Rush's favor. But then, proudly, as a fellow physician, he told Rush that he was sending him a paper on the sore throat and his method of treating it. He thanked Rush for the book on the "Christian life" that he had received, and added: "I have sent you some nuts of this contry that we call pecan and two fanes [*fans*] of wile turkey feathers for madam and her daughter. . . . I wanted to send you some medical plantes but it is not the season to dig them. . . ."²⁰

The paper that Durham sent, "An Account of the Putrid Sore Throat at New Orleans," Rush read before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Apparently it was not well received, and Rush must have written to that effect, because on March 30, 1790, Durham replied: "I am very hapey to here [that the] essay on the sore throat was read before the College but am sorey that the treatment was not correspond [*well received*] with [by] the faculty of Pennsylvania."²¹

More typical of the Durham correspondence is his letter of September 28, 1794, in which he solicitously inquired after the health of Rush and his family, and then noted that he was enclosing a list of medicines that he needed because they were unavailable in New Orleans. Among the items requested were jalap, rhubarb, sago, purified nitre, spirits of lavender, Glauber's salt, calomel and spirits of wine. Durham was bold enough to complain to his distinguished friend: "I have wrote to you at different times for som medicines and have never had [an] answer from you. . . ."²²

There is a letter bearing only the date of October 18 which seems to have been written in 1794. In it, Durham requested "the treatise [by Rush] of the yellow fever that past in Philadelphia, for we have had it hear vere bad among the English, but it begins to crepe among the French for they laugh at the English." Observing that he had treated fifty yellow fever patients, Durham reported that he had lost but six, "which is les than all the other doctors hear."²³

Again, on March 1, 1795, Durham inquired after Rush's health,

²⁰ Durham to Rush, May 29, 1789, Rush Papers.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1790.

²² *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1794.

²³ *Ibid.*, Oct. 18 [1794?].

once more complaining of having had no answer to his correspondence. He mentioned having sent the previous July "a barrell of oranges, swete ones, by one Mr. Deseau, a French gentleman. . . ." And once more he enclosed a list of medicines that "I am in great want [of] just now": pitch burgundy, rhubarb, sago, Glauber's salt, saffron, purified nitre, jalap, camphine, gamboge, and pearl barley. Since many, if not most, of these items were classified as purgatives or cathartics, apparently Durham was as much of a believer in purging the human body as Rush was in bleeding it.²⁴

There follows a five-year lapse in correspondence until on February 16, 1800, Durham wrote: "I received your kind letter and the three volumes that you sent me. . . ." Then he proceeded to tell Rush of another outbreak of yellow fever in New Orleans: out of sixty-four patients "I lost [only] eleven of them." He treated them with a concoction of "garden sorrel [*an herb*] and sugar," and then noted, though the remark probably fell upon deaf ears: "I find they will not bear bleeding hear so well as to the northward,"²⁵

The following spring, Durham's former owner, Dr. Dow, came to Philadelphia, carrying a letter of introduction to Rush: "I take [this] opportunity of writing and at the sam time interduse my old master and friend, Dr. Dow, and beg you will tak care of him for he has been vere kind to me in all occasions, and he want to be interduse to you. . . ." And again, more medicines were requested, with the amounts spelled out this time: two pounds of magnesia alba, a pound of calomel, twenty pounds of Glauber's salt, and two pounds of jalap. Dr. Dow carried "a small sack of pecans," a gift from Durham.²⁶

The next-to-last letter is dated February 10, 1801. It acknowledged a letter from Rush and "three smal pamphlets." Then, "I ask your advices for a patient that has been troubled with a complaint for these 14 years. It is a disease of the stomach." Durham described the symptoms and his treatment, concluding: "He has consulted all the doctors far and near and none of them have done

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mar. 1, 1795.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1800.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, May 20, 1800.

him as much good as I have done and [he] sticks to me stil and he begs that I ask your advices. . . ."²⁷

Durham's last letter was written on April 5, 1802. In it he requested Rush to send him a pamphlet on "the pox," since he was puzzled by a poxlike ailment of several of his patients. "The Sick has not," he wrote, "that vomiting and head ach as is common in the Small Pox, and the Pustuels rise for five or six Days and turne black and then fal off in Scabies. It is not the Chicken Pox nor the Swine Pox." He thanked Rush for three pamphlets on other disorders and asked, as was his custom, to be remembered to "Mrs. Rush and all the fameley."²⁸

On that note Durham disappears from the pages of history. The 1801 restriction by the Spanish authorities to "Derum's" having "the right only to cure throat disease and no other" may well have caused him to leave New Orleans. Indeed, it was just the previous year that Durham had written Rush of his desire to "leave New Orleans and come and live in the States."²⁹ But Durham does not seem to have returned to Philadelphia. Did he die in 1802 or sometime soon thereafter, perhaps of yellow fever? Did he move to some other city? Why did he cease corresponding with Dr. Rush? The mystery remains, but so does the record of this "first black physician" in America, together with that of the uncommon friendship between one of America's most distinguished figures and a former slave.

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 10, 1801.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Apr. 5, 1802.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, May 20, 1800.