

Comments on James McCune Smith, MD by Daniel Laroche, MD

at the ceremonial installation of portrait of Dr. McCune Smith at

The New York Academy of Medicine

February 26, 2019

Thank you, Dr. Salerno.

When I first joined The New York Academy of Medicine many years ago I initially very excited to be part of this prominent institution. When I came to the Academy and saw the Marion Sims Statue out front and the many pictures of white physicians and no Black physicians, I felt something was wrong. Marion Sims practiced many surgical techniques on slave women to test his techniques. I lobbied to Jo Ivey Boufford, the past president of The New York Academy of Medicine, to see about removing the Marion Sims statue, and with the protest of many others including many people in this room, the statue was removed.

In the fall of 2017 I visited the historical rare medical books library at The New York Academy of Medicine. I asked about David Kearney McDonogh, MD, the first Black physician at New York Eye and Ear. Arlene Shaner, the librarian, gave me an article called "An Account of Physicians of Color in the United States" by M.O. Bousfield that discussed both Dr. McCune Smith and Dr. McDonogh. Arlene also informed me about the story of Dr. McCune Smith (who was one of the best trained and practicing physicians of his time here in NY) was not allowed to be admitted to The New York Academy of Medicine because of his race. She informed me that the Academy had the original minutes. I returned to the Academy in January of 2018 and read through all of the original minutes and I strongly felt that a wrong had to be made right. I felt I found the reason why I felt something was wrong at the Academy. There was a history of discrimination at the highest level whose legacy I was feeling with no Black presence. I also reached out to Bob Vietrogoski, who had previously given a presentation on Dr. McCune Smith at the Academy called "Agitation of the Question: James McCune's Smith's Nomination for Fellowship, New York Academy of Medicine, 1847."

I also informed him and Arlene that Dr. McCune Smith should be admitted posthumously and I would be willing to re-nominate him as a fellow posthumously. I then also reached out to James Tsai, MD to inform him of this as well. In the spring of 2019 I received a phone call from Dr. Tsai that the new President of The New York Academy of Medicine, Dr. Judith Salerno, was going to give Dr. McCune Smith admission to the Academy posthumously. Thank you, Dr. Salerno. Dr. Smith published medical articles and had many lectures and writings discussing the slavery efforts, racism among white abolitionists or the effects of the slave system. He also wrote a paper on the Haitian revolution. Being of Haitian descent and also aware of the global significance of this revolution to abolish slavery I was quite impressed.

In addressing the inequality of education to the children of immigrants compared to American-born Blacks, Dr. McCune Smith stated in a speech:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I have now laid before you a concise view of the revolutions of Hayti in the relation of cause and effect ... and I trust you will now think, that these revolutions constitute an epoch worthy of the anxious study of every American citizen. Among the many lessons that may be drawn from this portion of history is one not unconnected with the present occasion ... there is gradually creeping into our otherwise prosperous state the incongruous and undermining influence of caste. One of the local manifestations of this unrepugnant sentiment is, that while 800 children, chiefly of foreign parents, are educated and taught trades at the expense of all the citizens, colored children are excluded from these privileges.

With the view to obviate the evils of such an unreasonable proscription, a few ladies of this city, by their untiring exertions, have organized an "Asylum for Colored Orphans." I would point out to them the revolutions of Hayti, where, in the midst of the incantations of civil war, there appeared, as a spirit of peace, the patriot, the father, the benefactor of mankind—[Toussaint L'Ouverture](#), a freedman, who had been taught to read while in slavery!"

I then commissioned an art portrait of Dr. James McCune Smith for The New York Academy of Medicine by Haitian artist Junior Jacques and subsequently donated it to the Academy. I thank the Academy for accepting this gift and displaying it for this generation and the future to see and learn from.

This has been a passion for me because the contributions of Blacks have been hidden and distorted in America. A Black person in Africa wrote the first book, *The Wisdom of Ptah-Hotep* was written by an African. The first physician was an African named Imhotep. In America there were many great contributions to medicine by Blacks despite slavery and this should be acknowledged and celebrated. This is not just Black history but the history of everyone to know and celebrate.

Daniel Laroche, MD

President, Advanced Eyecare of New York