

Daniel Hale Williams

Surgeon (1856–1931)

Daniel Hale Williams was one of the first physicians to perform open-heart surgery in the United States and founded a hospital with an interracial staff.

Born on January 18, 1856, in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, Daniel Hale Williams pursued a pioneering career in medicine. An African-American doctor, in 1893 Williams opened Provident Hospital, the first medical facility to have an interracial staff. He was also one of the first physicians to successfully complete pericardial surgery on a patient. Williams later became chief surgeon of the Freedmen's Hospital.

Early Life

Daniel Hale Williams III was born on January 18, 1856, in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, to Sarah Price Williams and Daniel Hale Williams II. The couple had several children, with the elder Daniel H. Williams inheriting a barber business. He also worked with the Equal Rights League, a black civil rights organization active during the Reconstruction era.

After the elder Williams died, a 10-year-old Daniel was sent to live in Baltimore, Maryland, with family friends. He became a shoemaker's apprentice but disliked the work and decided to return to his family, who had moved to Illinois. Like his father, he took up barbering, but ultimately decided he wanted to pursue his education. He worked as an apprentice with Dr. Henry Palmer, a highly accomplished surgeon, and then completed further training at Chicago Medical College.

Opens the First Interracial Hospital

Williams set up his own practice in Chicago's South Side and taught anatomy at his alma mater, also becoming the first African-American physician to work for the city's street railway system. Williams—who was called Dr. Dan by patients—adopted sterilization procedures for his office informed by the recent findings on germ transmission and prevention from Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister.

Due to the discrimination of the day, African-American citizens were still barred from being admitted to hospitals and black doctors were refused staff positions. Firmly believing this needed to change, in May 1891, Williams opened Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses, the nation's first hospital with a nursing and intern program that had a racially integrated staff. The facility, where Williams worked as a surgeon, was publicly championed by famed abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass.

Completes Open-Heart Surgery

In 1893, Williams continued to make history when he operated on James Cornish, a man with a severe stab wound to his chest who was brought to Provident. Without the benefits of a blood transfusion or modern surgical procedures, Williams successfully sutured Cornish's pericardium, the membranous sac enclosing the heart, thus becoming one of the first people to perform open-heart surgery. (Physicians Francisco Romero and Henry Dalton had previously performed pericardial operations.) Cornish lived for many years after the operation.

In 1894, Williams moved to Washington, D.C., where he was appointed the chief surgeon of the Freedmen's Hospital, which provided care for formerly enslaved African Americans. The facility had fallen into neglect and had a high mortality rate. Williams worked diligently on revitalization, improving surgical procedures, increasing specialization, launching ambulance services and continuing to provide opportunities for black medical professionals, among other feats. In 1895, he co-founded the National Medical Association, a professional organization for black medical practitioners, as an alternative to the American Medical Association, which didn't allow African-American membership.

Marriage and Later Career

Williams left Freedmen's Hospital in 1898. He married Alice Johnson, and the newlyweds moved to Chicago, where Williams returned to his work at Provident. Soon after the turn of the century, he worked at Cook County Hospital and later at St. Luke's, a large medical institution with ample resources.

Beginning in 1899, Williams also made annual trips to Nashville, Tennessee, where he was a voluntary visiting clinical professor at Meharry Medical College for more than two decades. He became a charter member of the American College of Surgeons in 1913.

Death and Legacy

Daniel Hale Williams experienced a debilitating stroke in 1926 and died five years later, on August 4, 1931, in Idlewild, Michigan.

Today, Williams's work as a pioneering physician and advocate for an African-American presence in medicine continues to be honored by institutions worldwide.