



James Still:



*“The Black
Doctor of
the Pines”*

By Henry H. Sherk, MD, & John Zen Jackson, Esq.

In the 1930s, an old house in the Cross Roads section of Medford, New Jersey, was about to be torn down. Perhaps with feelings of sadness or nostalgia about the pending demolition of this fine old structure, local resident Frank Wolf wandered through the empty house. It is likely that Wolf was musing upon the passing of time and reflecting on the lives of the people who had resided there when his thoughts were interrupted by the discovery of a book with pages yellowed by age. When he blew away the dust on the cover, Wolf realized that he had come across an original copy of *Early Recollections and Life of Dr. James Still*, the 1877 autobiography of the legendary “Black Doctor of the Pines.”¹

Indeed, the old house was the residence of James Still, one of the most prominent landowners in Medford who had died in 1882. It was adjacent to the medical office he built in 1855. The house was demolished in 1932, but the office was later entered in the New Jersey Register and the National Register of Historical Places. The property continues to be preserved by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Green Acres Program.²

Wolf had found an important document, and, thanks to his efforts, it was made available to the Medford Historical Society, which printed facsimile copies in 1971. Although some of the original versions are in the hands of collectors, Still’s work remains available to the general public through book resellers and online versions.³ *Early Recollections and Life of Dr. James Still* describes, in painful detail, the terrible struggle James Still endured in his climb from the degradation of his parents’ enslave-



Henry H. Sherk, MD, at what remained of the Still property in 2011.

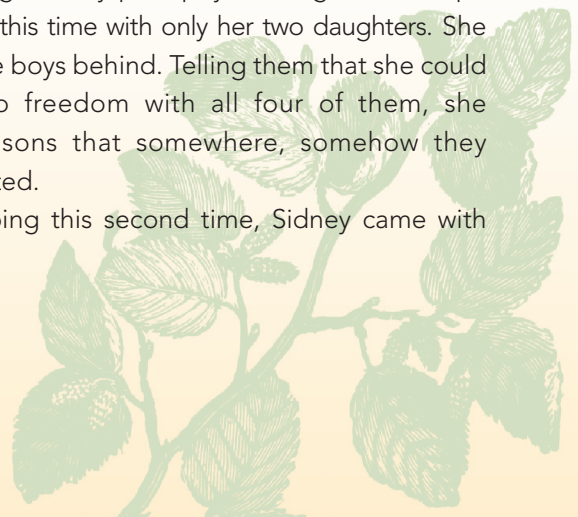
ment and the abject poverty of his own early years of freedom to a position of wealth and universal respect despite challenges to his legitimacy as a medical practitioner. Still self-published his book and had it printed by J.B. Lippincott & Company, then a publishing house in Philadelphia.

IN THE BEGINNING

James Still was the son of Levin and Sidney Steel, a couple who were born into slavery in the late 18th century as the property of a Maryland farmer. Levin purchased his freedom from the farmer sometime between 1799 and 1806, when he was said to be 21 years old. By then, he was married and the father of four children, two boys and two girls. He attempted to purchase their freedom as well but was refused by the farmer who demanded more money than Levin could possibly pay at that time. He left the area to become employed and make up the shortfall. Sidney, however, could not endure her life under bondage and attempted to escape from Maryland with her children. She got as far as Cumberland County in New Jersey but was then betrayed and taken back into slavery.

Sidney was locked in an attic for six months and reportedly kept her sanity by singing hymns and spirituals. Her captors finally decided it was safe to release her, but they were wrong. Sidney promptly tried again to escape to freedom but this time with only her two daughters. She had to leave the boys behind. Telling them that she could not make it to freedom with all four of them, she promised her sons that somewhere, somehow they would be reunited.

After escaping this second time, Sidney came with



Levin to Indian Mills in Burlington County. They arrived in 1806 and changed their last name from Steel to Still in an effort to avoid recognition by the professional hunters of escaped slaves. Sidney changed her first name to Charity for the same reason. Although New Jersey took its first step to abolish slavery in the state in 1804, it did not grant immediate emancipation but rather put in place a “gradual abolition” of slavery.⁴ To reduce the risk of being taken back into slavery, the Still family chose to live deep in the woods of the Pine Barrens.⁵

Levin and Charity had between 16 and 18 children. One, born on April 8, 1812, was named James. Following Levin’s death on December 24, 1842, his wife was left with four acres of sandy soil, a cabin, a horse and wagon and a few cows. Charity died on April 23, 1857. Sadly, neither of James Still’s parents lived to learn of the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln in January 1863.

The two oldest boys, who had been left behind in Maryland when their mother escaped to freedom, were sold to new owners on two different occasions. Levin, Jr. was subjected to a severe beating and later died of poor health. The other boy, Peter (who was sometimes known under his slave name of Peter Gist), eventually purchased his freedom and came to Philadelphia. There, by chance, he met William Still, the youngest brother in the family. Both William and Peter achieved their own level of renown. William Still, often called “The Father of the Underground Railroad,” was an ardent abolitionist and active in helping slaves reach Canada and freedom. He is the author of *The Underground Railroad*, which was published after the Civil War.⁶ In 1856, Peter’s experiences were recorded by Kate E.R. Pickard in *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife “Vina” after Forty Years of Slavery*.⁷ This narrative includes an account of the reunion with his mother, then aged 80, which is also described in James Still’s later self-published autobiography.

THE LONG ROAD TO MEDICINE

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, life was hard for the Still family in the Pine Barrens and forests of Burlington County. Everyone had to work, and hunger was always a real concern. At age eight or nine, James was put out to

labor chopping wood, getting rails in the cedar swamp and making charcoal. He was then indentured to several local farmers when he was in his teens. Fortunately, one farmer provided James with a modicum of schooling. Still wrote that he received “three months’ instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic, which completed me to start out in life.”⁸ This instruction was spread out over three years, with one month’s schooling each winter.

The spark that put Still on the path to be healer had been struck earlier. When Still was about three-and-a-half years old, a local physician came to the house to vaccinate the children. In his autobiography, Still described his immediate fascination:

From that moment I was inspired with a desire to be a doctor. It took deep root in me, so deep that all the drought of poverty or lack of education could not destroy the desire. From that day I did not want any knowledge save that of the healing art. It grew with my growth and strengthened with my strength. My thinking faculties were aroused, and I soon commenced to practise. Among the children I procured a piece of glass, and made virus of spittle; I also procured a thin piece of pine bark, which I substituted for a lancet. Thus was the little acorn, which was intended to become an oak, thrown into the thicket, not knowing that it should ever again be seen or heard from, but there was One, unseen, who cared for and watered and protected.⁹

However, there was much to be accomplished before that desire became a reality. Still obtained employment working in a glue factory in Philadelphia. The work was extremely hard, monotonous and unhealthy, but the factory closed in the winters, and Still was able to go back to his family in the Pine Barrens where he could make money cutting wood. Later, he would also cut marl. In time, he was able to save \$100. In 1835, he married despite doubts about his ability to support a wife. Tragically, his wife died on August 12, 1838 (probably from tuberculosis), about a year after the birth of their first child. Still remarried. Three days after the wedding, however, the infant girl died on August 11, 1839. Still noted in his book that both mother and daughter died on a Sunday.

The desire to study medicine again surfaced, but

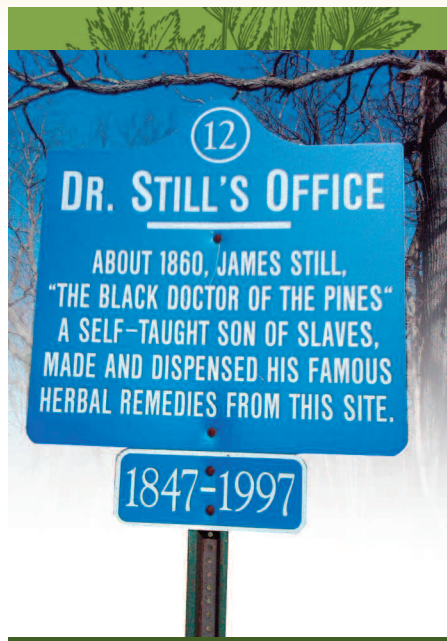


there appeared to be no way to accomplish that goal. Still continued to work and was able to earn enough money to further his education by purchasing books on medical botany and anatomy. He became facile with words and math and decided to go into business for himself. In 1842, Still bought a still and began to produce extracts and tinctures of sassafras roots and herbs of various kinds. He also began to manufacture essences and concentrations of flavors, such as peppermint and vanilla. His products were very good, and he developed a brisk business selling to pharmacists and physicians in Philadelphia. By that time in his life, Still had developed a working knowledge of medical botany. He combined what he had read in the medical textbooks with various herbal recipes to produce remedies that seemed to help people. He described the start of his medical practice as follows:

I did not know that the time had come for me to practise. I made up some tinctures for my own family, and one of the neighbors was known to it. One of the daughters of this neighbor developed scrofula, and he had me visit her. I gave her medicine which soon cured her. I thought it no great thing, for it always seemed to me that all diseases were curable, and I wondered why the doctors did not cure them. ... The neighbors began to call upon me, and I administered to them with great satisfaction.¹⁰

Still's reputation grew, and soon almost all of his time was taken up with making and selling these medicines. He decided to discontinue his distillery business and to devote himself fulltime to "doctoring." He enjoyed fabulous success. People eventually flocked to his office in Medford, and he answered calls to visit the sick in their homes throughout the Pine Barrens of Burlington County and beyond.

Soon, Still was able to afford a carriage, instead of the rickety farm wagon he had made himself, to use when



calling on patients. He also bought a much finer horse. He purchased property for a dwelling house in 1849, and then in 1852, he acquired a nearby tavern at the Cross Roads Corner in Medford, which he rented out. He later began to use the tavern as a hospital for patients who were too sick to return home. He had his house rebuilt in 1869 as a fine residence with a Mansard roof to shelter his family and himself. (It was in this house that Frank Wolf found the self-published autobiography the day before the building was demolished.)

In 1870, Still extended an invitation to all of his brothers and sisters to meet at his home in Medford to gather together and talk over recollections of the past. In this chapter of his autobiography, Still describes the "seriousness [that] seemed to pervade the little assembly."¹¹ The topics of conversation not only included reminiscences of their father and mother, with their struggles in and out of slavery, but also discussion of Abraham Lincoln's emancipation of slaves in the United States. "In this we all rejoiced greatly."¹² Still eventually had a stroke and died at home in Medford of natural causes.

The 1870 gathering was the first of what would become a regular family tradition. The 143rd Still family reunion, now held in Lawnside, New Jersey, was in August, 2012. These gatherings always end with a toast to freedom and in more recent years with everyone joining together in the "Electric Slide" line dance.

CRITICS AND DETRACTORS

Still had his critics and detractors. His success did not go unnoticed by the other members of the healing professions in Burlington County.¹³ In fact, they resented his popularity and referred to him derisively as "Black Jim" and in other more crude and offensive terms. The demographics of the Pine Barrens and surrounding area of New Jersey were such that many of his patients were white—a source of annoyance to white physicians in the area. Reflecting the prejudices of the time, in one professional publication he was charac-



terized as “an Ethiopian enjoying a large and lucrative practice, guided, as he affirms, solely by inspiration.”¹⁴

His critics also accused him of practicing medicine without a license. They were correct. Still did not have a formal medical education and did not have medical credentials. He was part of what has sometimes been called “lay” or “popular” medicine.¹⁵ The title “Doctor” came to him because of the respect and affection he engendered in his patients.

There have been laws in New Jersey regulating the practice of “Physic and Surgery” and requiring licensure since colonial times and with a legislative enactment in 1783 after the War for Independence. The Medical Society of New Jersey was founded in 1766 (it was the first state society of physicians in the nation) and later was given broad regulatory powers by the New Jersey Legislature.

Still consulted with Mount Holly lawyer John C. Ten Ecyk, who later was a United States Senator during the Civil War. Ten Ecyk counseled that Still could be fined for practicing without a license and that he could not collect fees for medical services, but as Still reported the conversation: “‘You can sell medicine,’ said he, ‘and charge for delivering, and then you can collect it just the same as for anything else. There is a fine for giving prescriptions, but you don’t give them; you sell medicine and there is nothing to stop you.’”¹⁶ Still made modifications to his approach to practice and prospered.

In 1880, the New Jersey Legislature passed “[a]n act to regulate the practice of medicine and surgery,” which added a requirement that every person practicing medicine or surgery “shall be a graduate of some legally-chartered medical college or university in good standing, or some medical society having power by law to grant diplomas.”¹⁷ A copy of the diploma was to be deposited with the county clerk and failure to comply was punishable by criminal penalties of fines and imprisonment. This legislation was seemingly directed at Still. He was born under circumstances that had made college and medical school impossible. Arguing for more stringent licensing requirements, an editorial in 1880 referred to “[o]ne hoary-headed old negro in Burlington County—who knows no more about medicine than a Barnegat clam—defies the law.”¹⁸

The legislation led to a public outcry and protest. In

response, a year later, the Legislature passed an amendment so that persons who “had twenty years’ experience in the practice of medicine or surgery in any one locality” in the state were exempt from these requirements.¹⁹ Still had practiced in the Medford area of Burlington County for over 40 years and was therefore exempt from compliance. Nonetheless, the attacks on Still continued.

Still’s competitors criticized him for selling herbal medicines of unproven efficacy. That charge was true, but in the middle of the 19th century, the entire armamentarium of the regular medical establishment was also not scientifically proven. Oliver Wendell Holmes, MD, summarized this matter by stating that if all the medicines then being administered to patients by doctors were thrown overboard and sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be “all the better for mankind—and all the worse for the fishes.”²⁰

THE JAMES STILL LEGACY

In addition to the Leeds Devil,²¹ the many legends of the Pine Barrens include stories about Still. One tale says that he was lynched for having studied medicine. Another says that his ghost has come to the aid of injured or stranded travelers in the Pine Barrens. All of these are tall tales.

However, the stature and accomplishments of James Still have withstood the test of time. He appears prominently in many of Henry C. Beck’s classic works of New Jersey folklore and reminiscences that he started publishing in 1936.²² Still was the subject of a review article in a 1963 issue of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, which concluded that he was “a noteworthy figure of high ideals and aspirations [who] apparently helped many and harmed few.”²³ A brief book review of Still’s autobiography appeared in a 1972 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, commenting that “there is much excellent detail on the state of medical theory and medical practice, in both its ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ aspects.”²⁴ Still was also featured in John McPhee’s paean to the Pines Barrens that appeared in the *New Yorker* and then as a full book, with the observation that besides treating piles with sassafras, he “treated hypochondria, on the other hand, with wit



and wisdom, and thereby effected 'cures' where many physicians failed."²⁵

Still has an additional legacy that goes beyond his practice. His son—also named James—was given the chance to succeed in the arena that had been denied to the father: the formal classroom. In fact, James Still, Jr. went to the very top of the educational establishment and graduated from Harvard University with an MD degree in 1871. He was among the earliest African-Americans to graduate from Harvard with a medical degree.²⁶ The younger

James Still did not return to New Jersey but remained in Boston and practiced medicine there for the rest of his life. In 2008, Harvard Medical School held the inaugural Howard, Dorsey, Still Lecture, named for the first three African-Americans who graduated from Harvard Medical School, recognizing individuals who have made significant contributions to advancing the nation's health.

James Still, the Black Doctor of the Pines, achieved a great deal despite the fact that he had to overcome obstacles that today seem impossible to understand or comprehend. One wonders how he was able to do it. How did he achieve the dignity and strength of character and charitable outlook that he appeared to manifest throughout his life? It would seem that the decisive influence was his religious faith. He believed deeply in the ideas of grace and redemption so that he could easily obey the scriptural admonitions having to do with the forgiveness of one's enemies. In his autobiography, there are few references to his critics, and these are mostly ironic. For example, he mentions a "Dr. B." who had trouble treating the illness of a given patient; that patient later responded beautifully to Still's medicines. Those remarks were made without rancor, but rather as simple statements about events that happened.

It is best to conclude a discussion of James Still with his own words:




When I take a retrospective view of my life, of the many difficulties with which I had to contend, the mountains of prejudice which I have had to meet, the poverty which hung as a dry cloud about my childhood and early manhood, without training, a mind uncultured and undisciplined, no one to lend a helping hand, but many to give the cold shoulder, and hinder my progress as best they could, I almost wonder that I have attained my present time of calm weather and clear sky. All the blessings and many of the luxuries of life surround me, and as I

humbly trust I have served in some measure the generation to which I belong, I can only exclaim, "He that is mighty hath done great things for me."

In this retrospect I take great consolation. ... Although my time may be brief, I have the pleasant satisfaction of knowing that I have aught against none and good will to all.²⁷

Henry H. Sherk, MD, who was an editor-in-chief of MDAdvisor, died on April 9, 2012. He had had a long-standing interest in medical history and in 2008 had written Getting It Straight: A History of American Orthopedics for the 75th anniversary of the American Academy of Orthopedics. Dr. Sherk had done research for the preparation of this article at the Burlington County Historical Society and was given full access to the extensive files on James Still. The article was not completed before Dr. Sherk's death but has been finished by John Zen Jackson, Esq., with admiration for Dr. Sherk and affection for the legends and lore of New Jersey's Pine Barrens.

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¹ Still, J. (1877). *Early life and reflections of Dr. James Still*. [Self-published by author]. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Company.



- ² McDonald, D. (2012). *Images of America: Medford*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 102.
- ³ See, e.g., Internet Archive at <http://archive.org/details/earlyrecollectio00stil>
- ⁴ An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. 28th General Assembly, ch. 103, 251-254 (1804, Feb. 15).
- ⁵ Lang, C.A. (1980). James Still: New Jersey's physician of the Pines, *Negro History Bulletin*, 43, 82–83.
- ⁶ Still, W. (1872). *The underground railroad: A record*. Philadelphia, PA: Porter & Coates [Available at www.quinnipiac.edu/other/abl/etext/ugrr/ugrr.html]
- ⁷ Pickard, K. E. R. (1856). *The kidnapped and the ransomed: Being the personal recollection of Peter Still and his wife "Vina," after forty years of slavery*. Syracuse, NY: William T. Hamilton. [Available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/pickard.html>] Note: The circumstances of Peter's separation from his mother and her escape to New Jersey are also told in James Still's autobiography, but the details are different than the account in the earlier Pickard narrative. That pre-Civil War account changed the circumstances of the separation to protect the mother from slave hunters who might still seek her out.
- ⁸ Still, J. (1877). 3.
- ⁹ Still, J. (1877). 16.
- ¹⁰ Still, J. (1877). 76.
- ¹¹ Still, J. (1877). 161–162.
- ¹² Still, J. (1877). 163.
- ¹³ Moss, S.W. (2001). James Still and the regulars: The struggle for legitimacy. *New Jersey Medicine*, 98, 39–44.
- ¹⁴ Moss, S. W. (2011). *The country practitioner: Ellis P. Townsend's brave little medical journal*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris. 24.
- ¹⁵ Starr, P. (1982). *The social transformation of American medicine*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 47–48.
- ¹⁶ Still, J. (1877). 82.
- ¹⁷ An Act to Regulate the Practice of Medicine and Surgery. New Jersey Public Laws 1881, ch. 199, 297 (1880).
- ¹⁸ Moss, S. W. (2011). 61.
- ¹⁹ An Act to Regulate the Practice of Medicine and Surgery. New Jersey Public Laws 1881, ch. 49 (1880). Supplement.
- ²⁰ Holmes, O. W. (1883). *Medical Essays 1842-1882*. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 202–203. [Available at <http://archive.org/details/medicalholmesw18400holm>]
- ²¹ Official Website for the State of New Jersey available at www.state.nj.us/nj/about/famous/nj_devil.html. Note: Also known as the Jersey Devil, there is a vast literature on what many consider New Jersey's most infamous resident. See, e.g., McCloy, J.F. & Miller, R. (1987) *The Jersey Devil* Moorestown, NJ: Middle Atlantic Press. It has been observed that while New Jersey does not have a state song, it is the only state that has an official demon. Miller, J.L. *Third time is the charm for New Jersey's state constitution* available at www.njsbf.org/images/content/1/1/11068/Constitutionally%20NJ.pdf.
- ²² See, e.g., Beck, H. C. (1936). *Forgotten towns of southern New Jersey*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 35–48; Beck, H. C. (1956). *The roads of home*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 138–150. See also, McMahon, M. (1973). *South Jersey towns: History and legends*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 104–108.
- ²³ Cobb, W. M. (1963). "Dr." James Still: New Jersey pioneer. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 55, 196–199.
- ²⁴ King, L. S. (1972). Book review: A 19th century "doctor." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 220, 421.
- ²⁵ McPhee, J. (1981). *The Pine Barrens*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 22–23.
- ²⁶ Note: Some sources identify the son as the second African-American to receive a medical degree from Harvard. This is a somewhat inaccurate. James T. Still, MD graduated HMS in 1871. He was preceded by two other African-Americans—Edwin Howard and Thomas Dorsey—who were classmates together and graduates of HMS in 1869.
- ²⁷ Still, J. (1877). 121–122.

