The Caretakers of the African American Race

Some may suggest that it is an exaggeration to state that without nurses and the field of nursing that pharmacist, doctors, and dentists would find it extremely difficult if not impossible to function and complete their occupations. In all reality, that statement is not too farfetched. Each trained medical person in those fields have certified nurses at their everyday disposal to aid in the caretaking of patients. For years African American women worked throughout the black community as untrained nurses, healing those around them with home remedies.[[1]](#footnote-1) This essay will depict the early struggles and accomplishments achieved by African Americans in the nursing field when faced with racism and opposition.

Mary Eliza Mahoney was the first African American professional graduate nurse in history. In the year 1879 she graduated from New England Hospital for Women and Children School of Nursing in Boston out of a class of 42. It must be noted that this occurred just sixteen years after the Emancipation Proclamation.[[2]](#footnote-2) The nursing school stipulated that only one Negro and one Jewish student be accepted each year.[[3]](#footnote-3) This accomplishment hailed Mahoney as the first African American woman to receive a diploma in nursing but certainly not the last.[[4]](#footnote-4) Mahoney was a member of the American Nurses Association and the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN).[[5]](#footnote-5) The NACGN was vital in the continuation of African Americans in the nursing field up until its dissolution in 1951.

Though Mahoney opened the first official door to the field of nursing for African Americans, there were many untrained and uncertified nurses that took on the role of caretaker for those of their family, community, and even the people they worked for, in the years before and after Mahoney’s achievements. There were nurses in wars, on plantations as slaves, living in the fields, and even in the “big house,” that contributed to the health and care taking of many people. Their master’s families needed them but the master himself exploited these women.

Before Mahoney’s many contributions to nursing, Bridget "Biddy" Mason, a woman born a slave in 1818, worked on a Mississippi plantation as a midwife and an unofficial nurse.[[6]](#footnote-6) She completed tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and aiding in deliverance of babies. There was also, Nancy, the aunt of Linda Harriet Brent Jacobs who was born a mulatto slave in 1818 in South Carolina.[[7]](#footnote-7) She was a night nurse for her slave master’s mistress and tended to their baby. She was forced to lie on the floor in front of her mistress’s bedroom door while pregnant. Due to the excessive amount of work Aunt Nancy had to endure during the day, the lack of rest she received at night, and the inadequate amount of nutrition she received, unfortunately she had six stillborn babies along with two more that died. After each birth she was required to be back in place for her job as a night nurse no matter the side effects she was probably experiencing such as postpartum depression.

Jacobs was a 16-year-old woman who stayed close to her Aunt Nancy’s side at the time until one day when a respected white community physician, Dr. Flint, asked for her to be a nurse for his small child. He asked of her services with the ulterior motive of pleasing his sexual desires. His mistress found out, Jacobs ran away at the age of twenty-one, spending seven years hiding away in her grandmother’s basement to avoid re-enslavement. She then traveled to New York City on a steamboat employed as a nurse. She worked amongst white nurses and black servants where she was not able to fit in because the whites were disgusted and the blacks envious of her position.

The first African American public health nurse recorded in history was Jessie, Elizabeth Sleet Scales. She was a graduate of the 1895 class of Provident Hospital School of Nursing in Chicago. Daniel Hale William, a prominent black physician, who also later founded the Freedmen’s Hospital in 1894, established the Provident Hospital School of Nursing. He was adamant about the creation of black hospitals and nursing schools in every black community and stood for black self-help.[[8]](#footnote-8) Though this was his mentality he never turned down donations from leading white citizens of Chicago to help with the continuation of Provident.[[9]](#footnote-9) This school was the second African American women’s nursing school, Spellman College in Atlanta, being the very first in 1881.[[10]](#footnote-10) The *American Journal of Nursing* described Scales as “a young colored woman and trained nurse, whose genuine altruism and intelligence in social reform work has impressed with admiration her acquaintances and friends.[[11]](#footnote-11)”

In the 1890s, the ambition of African Americans was fueled by the negative energy and rejection given off by whites. They fought whole-heartedly for equal education, housing, and healthcare. Learning that it would not be afforded to them as it was to the rest of society, African Americans and some whites began creating hospitals and nursing schools for blacks. About a dozen black hospitals and nursing schools were established in various states.

White figures such as Julius Rosenwald contributed large amounts of money to black hospitals and nursing training facilities through his “Rosenwald Fund” because he wanted to make sure that the health of the white society was maintained and safe from “black germ carriers”. He stated that, “It is well to remember that germs recognize no color lines and the disease in one group threatens the health of all.” [[12]](#footnote-12)

From a white perspective there was a want for the black race to get separate healthcare facilities more than blacks wanted it for themselves in the beginning. Whites contributed to these nursing facilities and hospitals for blacks because they would do anything to make sure that the health of whites was not in jeopardy due to using the same facilities as blacks. Blacks on the other hand were tired of unfair treatment and racism. The segregated healthcare facilities provided them with inadequate services. By the year of 1928, the schools created for African Americans had produced 2,238 graduates, which accounted for 80.3 percent of the total of 2,784 black graduate nurses. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Among those facilities was the development of Watts Hospital and School of Nursing as well as Lincoln Hospital and School of Nursing in Durham North Carolina. George Watts opened Watts Hospital in 1895 with the original intentions to serve the white community of Durham and it did so until 1960.[[14]](#footnote-14) In 1900, Watts introduced his plans to add an African American wing to the hospital for the care of the black community but was quickly informed by them that it was not in their best interest so the plans were halted. Instead the African American community thought it would be best if a whole facility was constructed separately for them where they could be the healthcare providers as well as be treated patients.

That led to the founding of Lincoln Hospital in 1901 by Dr. Aaron Moore, Dr. Stanford Warren, and Mr. John Merrick to meet the healthcare needs of African Americans in Durham.[[15]](#footnote-15) The doors to the facility opened in august of that year with the mission to extend healthcare to all patients whether or not they could meet the payment requirements of the services rendered to them.[[16]](#footnote-16) The healthcare providers were instructed that each patient should be treated with respect and dignity and that the best medical care must be provided for the patients, as if they were a “family member.” From its opening in 1901 to 1925, 7,000 patients were admitted, most of whom were charity cases, which was a result of that mission.[[17]](#footnote-17) The hospital offered several services such as major and minor surgery, care of infants and children, and the delivery of babies. It also operated out patient clinics that were dedicated to tuberculosis, cancer, and routine adult medicine among other things. There was also a 24-hour emergency room in place being operated by interns, residents, and physicians.

In 1903 Miss Julia Latta, a graduate of St Agnes School of Nursing in Raleigh, joined the staff at Lincoln Hospital as director of Nursing. The Lincoln School of Nursing, which was the second nursing school opened in North Carolina, started in 1903 but was officially incorporated in 1905 under Latta’s direction. The nursing program had a two-year curriculum in 1903 however in 1910 it was expanded to three years. During her time as the director of nursing between 1903 and 1910, she graduated 14 African American nurses.

In 1925 Lincoln Hospital expanded and moved to a larger facility that was known as the “most modern hospital built for use by African Americans south of Washington DC.”[[18]](#footnote-18) During this time, Dr. Charles H. Shepard was in position as the superintendent. With the help of Patricia Hawkins Carter as the director of nursing in 1911, Lincoln Hospital was transformed into a modern institution with the establishment of a medical records department, implementation of standards for patient admissions, the expansion of lab and x-ray test, and the maintenance of standards for nursing and internship training.

The Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing was completely approved by the Board of Nurse Examiners of the State of North Carolina. The motto in place for the school was “Give the best to the world and the best will come back to you.” Student nurses provided services to patients while learning on the job and in the classroom. In the first year the nursing students were taught the basic sciences of nursing.[[19]](#footnote-19) After one year of school was completed the nurses were placed alongside graduate nurses on wards for patient care. They were graded on classroom work of at least 75 percent, practical work, personal appearance, and their professional etiquette.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1925 Ben Duke provided $35,000 for the construction of the Angier B. Duke Nurses Home for nursing students. This home provided accommodations for 40 nurses and large amounts of space for students and graduate nurses. Students had to fulfill graduation requirements to receive a diploma that would then make them eligible to take the state-licensing exam. The passage of that examination would be the deciding factor in whether or not the student could display her credentials as a Registered Nurse.

By the 1930s, over 180 graduates of Lincoln Nursing School were working all over the country in all branches of nursing. The nursing school formed ties with North Carolina College for Negroes (NCC) in 1930. The faculty instructed nursing students in psychology, psychiatry, chemistry, and bacteriology. The short distance of NCC from Lincoln Hospital made it convenient for students to walk back and forth to class, the hospital, and nurse’s home. They would study at the NCC library and use the gymnasium. Students with additional course work could receive a Bachelors of Science degree as well as their Registered Nurse credentials.

Della Rainey Jackson was one of the most distinguished graduates of Lincoln’s nursing school, for she became the first African American nurse to answer the call for nurses in World War II in 1941. In 1945 Registered Nurse Miss Lucille Zimmerman Williams took charge of the nurses training program where she would stay in position until its closing in 1971. She placed emphasis on professional attire, etiquette, and bedside manners. The nursing school became and maintained full accreditation from the North Carolina Board of Nurse Examiners until the mid 1960s when the loss of patients led to the compromise of the school’s clinical program.[[21]](#footnote-21) The training program met its end in 1971.

Now to give a more personal account the experiences of the African American nurse in Durham North Carolina, in an interview with Miss Ernestine Bryant Hoskins who is now 77 years old, recounted her experience of becoming a nurse in the 1940s and 50s through The Practical Nurse School program held at Hillside High School in Durham.[[22]](#footnote-22) The program that was originally supposed to be operated through Lincoln Hospital became a collaborative effort between Duke University Hospital, the Durham City School, and the NC Department Vocational Education. The program was titled “Program of the Durham School of Practical Nursing for Negroes” and began in 1948.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Hoskins recalled receiving a brochure for the program in the mail and labeled it a blessing. A native of Sandy Cross, North Carolina, Hoskins parents had no means of sending her to school so she worked out in the tobacco fields in Nash and Wilson Counties for long periods of time under the hot sun. After graduating from Nash County Training School she one day saw the brochure in the mail and decided that she wanted to become a nurse so that she would no longer have to work in tobacco fields. She felt that the nursing program in Durham would be her way out.[[24]](#footnote-24) Hoskins left Wilson for the yearlong nursing program in Durham and found a room to rent on Fayetteville Street upon her arrival. The nursing program was within walking distance of her room. She recalled the classroom portion of the program being held in the basement of Hillside High School. During training she learned how to make beds, bathe patients, and other basic nursing information like charting. The director of the program was a New York native that was extremely strict. Hoskins recalled having to make beds with people in them and the director would walk around behind each student to observe the bed, if it was not seemingly perfect, she would “tear the sheets up,” and make the student start completely over. Once the classroom portions of the program were completed the students were sent to Duke Hospital to attend clinical and practical training. During that training they learned through a hands-on approach by working bedside with patients.

In 1956 after passing the State Board exam, she had completed the nursing program in Durham and became a licensed Practical Nurse. Her first job was at Duke Hospital where she worked as a nurse for a few years. Hoskins explained that it was “not easy to be a nurse or become a nurse during those times.” She recalled being faced with racism when white patients under her care wanted to call her by her first name instead of her last. Patients spoke to the white medical professionals by last name without question. She explained to the white patients that they were to do the same with her. From that statement she was often questioned about whether or not she thought she was “equal” to the white women that she worked amongst. She recalled explaining to the patients that she was equal because she had been trained and earned her credentials the “same as the white women” so she was equal to them. She also stressed that they were not familiar enough with her to call her “Ernestine,” as her family and friends did. But she witnessed other African American nurses granting the white patients their wishes by allowing them to call them “girl” and their first names. Hoskins said that she would never voluntarily subject herself to disrespect. A white man, who worked at Duke Hospital with her, told her that she was “too vocal” and that she “did not belong there.” Despite the display of racism from the patients, the other medical professions she worked amongst were helped and did not seem to “see color.”

Her first check was $160 for one month. Hoskins did not feel the pay matched the workload.

Eventually Hoskins decided to move back to Wilson with the confirmation of having a way of living by working in the nursing profession instead of in the tobacco fields. She was hired at what was Wilson Sanatorium, and is now the Special Care System in Wilson, where she worked for 30 full years. In this job, she experienced racism from the staff with which she worked. In the small rural Wilson area, white people felt a sense of entitlement and wanted to be treated as higher beings than African Americans. After working at the Sanatorium for 30 years she was hired at South Village Nursing Home in Rocky Mount North Carolina. Haskins worked from 1956 to 2010 and explained that she would not have changed any portion of her experience. Her life was altered completely after receiving a random brochure in the mail. She never knew that it would be the beginning of something she would grow to love and even pass down in her family. Her three younger sisters also followed in her footsteps and became nurses.

From the era of slavery to the 1940s, leading up to the desegregation of medical facilities, African American women took on the position of caretaker for their families and the families of others around them. A well-deserved and long overdue title was eventually extended to the race and African American women became some of the most well respected nurses in the profession. Though a title was extended, in the long stretch prior to it, African American women were the lifesavers and caretakers of complete strangers, their oppressors and loved ones. Today there are approximately 280,000 African American registered nurses and about 163,000 licensed nurses in the United States alone. The nursing profession became a promising one for the African American race and still proves to be prominent amongst them today.

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1. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989) Society often forgets about nurses after their jobs are done but they hold a vital position to the bettering of health. Nursing and nurses are often so quickly disregarded because the occupation is majority filled with females and they are often thought of as inadequate in everything compared to a man. As women are thought to be inadequate, African Americans are one in the same but that did not stop them from finding ways to care for their community with little to no resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carnegie, M. Elizabeth, *The Path We Tread: Blacks In Nursing 1854-1990.* New York: National League for Nursing Press, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), chap. 1. By the year of 1899 only five other African American females graduated from the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keaton Mable Staupers , *No Time For Prejudice*, (New York : The Macmillan Company, 1961), chap. 1: Mahoney was from Boston Massachusetts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Keaton Mable Staupers , *No Time For Prejudice*, (New York : The Macmillan Company, 1961), chap. 1,2: The National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses was founded by Martha Franklin and held its first meeting in 1909 with Mahoney present. Franklin was a graduate of Women’s hospital, Philadelphia. She attended her last meeting in 1921 and died in 1926. An award was developed and named in her honor. “The Mary Mahoney Award,” given for distinguished service to nursing. The NACGN merged with the American Nurses’ Association in 1951 and the award was continued and given for significant contributions to intergroup relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. African American Registry: A Non-Profit Education Organization, "From Slavery to Entrepreneur." Last modified 2013. <http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/slavery-entrepreneur-biddy-mason>. : Mason performed many duty and task as a slave but found herself in nursing after she gained freedom in 1856. Her nursing skills allowed her to gain economic independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Althea T. Davis, *Early Black African American Leaders in Nursing: Architects for Integration and Equality,* (London: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Inc. and National League for Nursing, 1999), chap. 1: Jacobs wrote her autobiography before the Civil War to inform the North of how she and many others were still enslaved under seemingly unbearable circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Keaton Mable Staupers, *No Time For Prejudice*, (New York: The Macmillan

   Company, 1961), chap.1: The motivation behind the establishment of this school started after an African American woman was denied the admission into another nursing school in Chicago. Dr. Williams aided in the hospital itself gaining fame when he performed the first documented operation on the human heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), chap. 1: He realized that whites were going to discriminate against blacks in the segregated hospitals and that they would do anything to keep blacks from training in their white nursing schools so he established their own. He was also intelligent enough to realize that the monies from white business owners would aid in the creation of those hospitals and nursing training schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), chap. 1: The original name of this nursing school was Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary funded by John D. Rockefeller and his wife. A Dr. Malcolm MacVicar established a small thirty-one-bed hospital in Atlanta to be used as the school infirmary and practice infirmary. It was decided that first-class training could not be provided at the hospital so the college trustees voted to end the program. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Elizabeth M. Carnegie, *The Path We Tread: Blacks in Nursing 1854-1990*, (New York: National League for Nursing Press, 1991), chap. 5: Scales was a native of Stratford, Ontario, Canada. She was discriminated against when she wanted to become a district nurse because that field had not been open to women of color. Scales decided to fight the discrimination by appealing to the Charity Organization Society whose tuberculosis committee employed her as a nurse for a two-month trial period. She performed her duties so well that she was given a permanent position. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), chap. 1: He had the mindset that if blacks needed help in their healthcare endeavors, whites must encourage them through counsel and service. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession 1890-1950*, (Indiana University Press, 1989), chap. 1: There are appendix tables located in the book listing statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kueber, Gary. *Open Durham*. 30 Oct. 2009. Web. 1 Jan. 2014. <http://www.opendurham.org/buildings/watts-hospital-1909-1980-north-carolina-school-science-and-math>. : The Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Medicare of 1965, demanded that hospitals be integrated. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), Intro: Washington Duke, who also offered $5,000 for an endowment, handled the construction costs. There were few facilities in the South that offered health care for blacks so Lincoln treated patients from as far away as Virginia and South Carolina. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 1: Dr. Moore who served as the first superintendent of the facility established the rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 1: There was a Duke Endowment established in 1925 at the death of James B. Duke that offered monies to the hospitals in the area to cover part of their charity care and this aided Lincoln Hospital as well as grants for new equipment. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 1: Benjamin N. Duke and James B. Duke offered $75,000 toward the construction of the second hospital to be matched by the Durham community. Ben Duke also later provided $35,000 for a student nurses home. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 5: The basic sciences of nursing were subjects such as anatomy, chemistry, bacteriology and nutrition. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 5: Each student was given a professional white uniform including a cap, shirt, shoes, and cape. They were expected to keep their uniforms pressed, starched, shoes shined, and caps clean under all circumstances. There was a cap for each of the three years nursing spent in training that were distinguished by the stripes or the lack there of that ran vertically across them. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Reynolds, P. Preston. *Durham's Lincoln Hospital*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia,

    2001), chap. 5: In order to meet accreditation, the school formed ties with other hospitals available for training African Americans such as the University of Cincinnati and Freedmen’s Hospital for pediatrics. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bryant Hoskins, Ernestine. Interview by author. Wilson, North Carolina, August 22, 2014. Notes in author’s possession. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. "Duke’s African American LPN Program." *Duke University Medical Center Archives*. Duke University Medical Center, 2014. There were other programs like this in the state but this was the only one operating for the training of only African American nurses. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Roberson, Morris. "History of NCHS." *Www.nashcentralfalcon.com*. 8 Oct. 2008. This school was dedicated to the education of African American children in Nash County during the early 1900s. It was established in 1926 as one of three African-American high schools in Nash County. It later became what is now Nash Central High School. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)