Martin Robison Delany (May 6, 1812 – January 24, 1885) was an African-American abolitionist, journalist, physician, and writer, arguably the first proponent of black nationalism.[1] He was one of the first three blacks admitted to Harvard Medical School. Trained as an assistant and a physician, he treated patients during the cholera epidemics of 1833 and 1854 in Pittsburgh, when many doctors and residents fled the city. He worked alongside Frederick Douglass to publish the North Star. Active in recruiting blacks for the United States Colored Troops, he was commissioned as a major, the first African-American field officer in the United States Army during the American Civil War.

After the Civil War, he worked for the Freedmen's Bureau in the South, settling in South Carolina, where he became politically active. He ran unsuccessfully for Lieutenant Governor and was appointed a Trial Judge. Later he switched his party loyalty and worked for the campaign of...
Delany was born free in Charles Town, West Virginia (then part of Virginia, a slave state) to Pati and Samuel Delaney. Although his father Samuel was enslaved, his mother was a free woman, and Martin took her status under slave law. Both sets of Martin Delany’s grandparents were African. Delaney’s paternal grandparents were of Gola ethnicity (from modern-day Liberia), taken captive during warfare and brought as slaves to the Virginia colony. Family oral history said that the grandfather was a chieftain, escaped to Canada for a period, and died resisting slavery abuses.[2]

Pati’s parents were born in the Niger Valley, West Africa, and were of Mandinka ethnicity. Her father was said to have been a prince[3] named Shango, captured with his betrothed Graci and brought to America as slaves. After some time, they were given their freedom in Virginia, perhaps based on their noble birth. Shango returned to Africa. Graci stayed in America with their only daughter Pati.[2] When Delany was just a few years old, attempts were made to enslave him and a sibling. Their mother Pati carried her two youngest children 20 miles to the courthouse in Winchester to argue successfully for her family’s freedom based on her own free birth.[2]

As he was growing up, Delany and his siblings learned to read and write using The New York Primer and Spelling Book, given to them by a peddler. Virginia prohibited education of black people. When the book was discovered in September 1822, Pati took her children out of Virginia to Chambersburg in the free state of Pennsylvania to ensure their continued freedom. They had to leave their father Samuel, but a year later he bought his freedom and rejoined the family in Chambersburg.

In Chambersburg, the young Delany continued learning. Occasionally he left school to work when his family could not afford for his education to continue. In 1831, at the age of 19, he journeyed west to the growing city of Pittsburgh, where he became a barber and laborer. Having heard stories about his parents’ ancestors, he wanted to visit Africa, which he considered his spiritual home.[6] Martin Delaney and 3 other people were accepted into Harvard Medical School but, white students had a petition so the African Americans were not accepted into the school.[5]

**MARRIAGE AND FAMILY**

While living in Pittsburgh, in 1843 Delany met and married Catherine A. Richards. She was the daughter of a successful food provisioner, said to be one of the wealthiest families in the city.[6] The couple had eleven children, seven of whom survived into adulthood. The parents stressed education and some of their children graduated from college.

**PITTSBURGH**

Delany became a student of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wylie Avenue. Shortly after, he began attending Jefferson College, where he was taught classics, Latin and Greek by Molliston M. Clark.

During the national cholera epidemic in 1832, Delany became apprenticed to Dr. Andrew N. McDowell, where he learned contemporary techniques of fire cupping and leeching, then considered the primary techniques to treat disease. He continued to study medicine under the mentorship of Dr. McDowell and other abolitionist doctors, such as Dr. F. Julius LeMoyné and Dr. Joseph P. Gazzam of Pittsburgh.

Delany became more active in political matters. In 1835 he attended his first National Negro Convention, held in Philadelphia since 1831.[7][8] He was inspired to conceive a plan to set up a ‘Black Israel’ on the east coast of Africa. He also became involved in the temperance movement and organizations caring for fugitive slaves who had escaped to Pennsylvania, a free state.

While in Pittsburgh, Delany began writing on public issues. In 1843 he began publishing The Mystery, a black-
MEDICINE AND NATIONALISM

While living in Pittsburgh, Delany studied the basics of medicine under doctors and maintained his own cupping and leeching practice. In 1849 he began to study more seriously to prepare to apply to medical school. In 1850 he failed to be accepted to several institutions before being accepted to Harvard Medical School, after presenting letters of support from seventeen physicians. He was one of the first three black men to be admitted there.

The month after his arrival, however, a group of white students wrote to the faculty, complaining that "the admission of blacks to the medical lectures highly detrimental to the interests, and welfare of the Institution of which we are members."[9] They stated they had "no objection to the education and elevation of blacks but do decidedly remonstrate against their presence in College with us."[9] Within three weeks, Delany and his two fellow black students, Daniel Laing, Jr. and Isaac H. Snowden, were dismissed, despite dissenting opinion among students and staff at the medical school.[10] Furious, Delany returned to Pittsburgh.

He became convinced that the white ruling class would not allow deserving persons of color to become leaders in society, and his opinions became more extreme. His book, The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered (1852) argued that blacks had no future in the United States.[11] He suggested they should leave and found a new nation elsewhere, perhaps in the West Indies or South America.

More moderate abolitionists were alienated by his position, and they resented his criticism of those who failed to hire colored men in their own businesses. Delany also criticized racial segregation among Freemasons, a fraternal organization.

Delany moved to Chatham, Ontario, Canada in 1856 and lived there until 1859.

As a response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, in 1859 and 1862, Delany published parts of Blake: Or The Huts of America in serialized form. His novel portrayed an insurrectionist's travels through slave communities. He believed that Stowe had portrayed slaves as too passive, although he praised her highlighting the cruelty of Southern slave owners. Modern scholars have praised Delany's novel as an accurate interpretation of black culture. The first half of Part One was serialized in The Anglo-African Magazine, January to July 1859. The rest of Part One was included in serial form in the Weekly Anglo African Magazine from 1861–1862.[12] This was the first novel by a black man to be published in the United States.

Delany worked for a brief period as principal of a colored school before going into practice as a physician. During another cholera outbreak in 1854, most doctors abandoned the city, as did many residents who could leave, as no one knew how the disease was caused nor how to control the epidemic. With a small group of nurses, Delany remained and cared for the victims. Martin Robison Delany (1812–1885) is rarely acknowledged in the historiography of African American education (Anderson, 1988; Bullock, 1967; Butchart, 1980). He is not counted among African American educators, perhaps because he neither featured prominently in the establishment of schools nor philosophized at length on Black education.[13]

In August 1854 Delany led the National Emigration Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.[14] Delany advanced his emigrationist argument in his manifesto "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent". The convention approved a resolution stating, "[A]s men and equals, we demand every political right, privilege and position to which the whites are eligible in the United States, and we will either attain to these, or accept nothing."

There were a significant number of women attendees who also voted for the resolution, considered the foundation of black nationalism.
TRAVELS OVERSEAS

In May 1859 Delany sailed from New York for Liberia, to investigate the possibility of a new black nation in the region. He traveled in the area for nine months and signed an agreement with eight chiefs in the Abeokuta region that would permit settlers to live on “unused land” in return for applying their skills for the community’s good. It is a question whether Delany and the chiefs shared the same concepts of land use. The treaty was later dissolved due to warfare in the region, opposition by white missionaries, and the advent of the American Civil War.

In April 1860 Delany left Liberia for England, where he was honored by the International Statistical Congress. One American delegate walked out in protest. At the end of 1860, Delany returned to the United States. The next year, he began planning settlement of Abeokuta. He gathered a group of potential settlers and funding. When Delany decided to remain in the United States to work for emancipation of slaves, the pioneer plans fell apart.

THE ARMY

In 1863 after Abraham Lincoln had called for a military draft, Delany began recruiting black men for the Union Army. His efforts in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and later Ohio raised thousands of enlistees, many of whom joined the newly formed United States Colored Troops. He wrote to the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, requesting that he make efforts “to command all of the effective black men as Agents of the United States,” but the request was ignored.

In early 1865 Delany was granted an audience with Lincoln. He proposed a corps of black men led by black officers who could serve to win over Southern blacks. Although a similar appeal by Frederick Douglass had already been rejected, Lincoln was impressed by Delany and described him as “a most extraordinary and intelligent man”. Delany was commissioned as a major a few weeks later, becoming the first black line field officer in the U.S. Army and achieving the highest rank an African American would reach during the Civil War.

After the war, he remained with the Army and served under General Rufus Saxton in the 52nd U.S. Colored Troops. He was later transferred to the Freedmen’s Bureau, serving on Hilton Head. He shocked white officers with his strong call for the right of freed blacks to own land. Later in 1865, he was mustered out of the Freedmen’s Bureau and shortly afterward resigned from the Army.

LATER LIFE

Following the war, Delany continued to be politically active. He worked to help black cotton farmers improve their business and negotiating skills to get a better price for their product. He also argued against blacks, when he saw fit. For instance, he opposed the vice presidential candidacy of J. J. Wright on the grounds of inexperience, and he opposed the candidacy of another black man for the mayor of Charleston, South Carolina.

Delany unsuccessfully sought various positions, such as the appointment as Consul General in Liberia and nomination for lieutenant governor of South Carolina. In 1874, Delany ran and lost an election for Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina to Richard Howell Gleaves. He was appointed as a Trial Justice in Charleston. In 1875 charges of "defrauding a church" were brought against him. He was convicted, forced to resign, and served some time in jail. Although pardoned by the Republican governor, Delany was not allowed to return to his former position.

Delany supported the Democratic candidate. By 1876, there were estimated to be 20,000 white men who were members of rifle clubs in the state. More than 150 blacks were killed in violence related to the election. Hampton reappointed Delany as Trial Justice.

White Democrats soon replaced Delany as Justice. In 1877 the federal government withdrew its troops from the South, marking an end to the Reconstruction era. Paramilitary groups such as the Red Shirts continued to suppress black voting in the Carolinas, especially in the upland counties.

In reaction to whites’ regaining power and the suppression of black voting, Charleston-based blacks started planning again for emigration to Africa. In 1877, they formed the ‘Liberia Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company’, with Delany as chairman of the finance committee. A year later, the company purchased a ship, the Azor, for the voyage. Delany worked as president of the board to organize the voyage.

In 1880, Delany withdrew from the project to serve his family. Two of his children were students at Wilberforce College in Ohio and required money for tuition fees. His wife had been working as a seamstress to make ends meet. Delany began practicing medicine again in Charleston. On January 24, 1885, he died of tuberculosis in Wilberforce, Ohio.

LEGACY AND HONORS

In 2003, scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Martin R. Delany as among the 100 Greatest African Americans. In 1991, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission installed a historical marker near 5 PPG Place in Pittsburgh, near to where published "The Mystery", that commemorated Delany's historic importance. In 2003, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission installed a second historical marker on Main Street in Chambersburg, noting Delany's historic importance.

WRITINGS

Delany’s unfinished novel Blake: or, the Huts of America advocated black activism and rebellion. In it Delany reworked several of Stephen Foster’s sentimental “plantation songs”. Thus he reappropriated material for his own purposes, to express black resistance and independence. Songs had been used in minstrel shows, in part to show slave contentment or lack of resistance to slavery. For example, Foster’s “Old Uncle Ned” mourned the passing of a slave:
Den lay down de shubble and de hoe  
Hang up de fiddle and de bow:  
No more hard work for poor old Ned  
He's gone whar de good darkeys go.[20]  

Delany turned this into a song of rebellion about the death of a master:  
Hang up the shovel and thee hoe-o-o-o!  
I don't care whether I work or no!  
Old master's gone to the slaveholders' rest —  
He's gone where they all ought to go!  

While Part One was published in serial form, scholars do not know if he ever completed the novel or published the entire thing. Sections found were edited and published in the 20th century.

WORKS

See the bibliography, "Martin Delany's Writings" at the Wayback Machine (archived May 1, 2009), West Virginia University Library.

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Notes

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FURTHER READING


EXTERNAL LINKS

"Martin Delany", Mr. Lincoln and Freedom, The Lincoln Institute and the Lehrman Institute


Works by Martin Delany at Project Gutenberg

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This article contains material written by James Surkamp and released into the public domain. The original material can be found at To Be More Than Equal: The Many Lives of Martin R. Delany, 1812–1885 at the Wayback Machine (archived April 24, 2012), the Martin Delany homepage.
Martin Robison Delany (May 6, 1812 – January 24, 1885) was an African-American abolitionist, journalist, physician, soldier and writer, and arguably the first proponent of black nationalism. Delany is credited with the Pan-African slogan of “Africa for Africans.” Born as a free person of color in Charles Town, Virginia (now in West Virginia) and raised in Chambersburg and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Delaney trained as physician’s assistant. During the cholera epidemics of 1833 and 1854 in Pittsburgh Abolitionist Martin Robison Delany was both a physician and newspaper editor, and became one of the most influential and successful anti-slavery activists of the 19th century. Synopsis. Born in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia), on May 6, 1812, Martin Robison Delany spent his life working to end slavery. He was a successful physician—one of the first African Americans admitted to Harvard Medical School—who used his influence to educate others about the evils of slavery with a number of abolitionist publications.
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