

Famous New Yorker

James McCune Smith

During his lifetime, James McCune Smith was a colleague of Frederick Douglass in the anti-slavery movement and famous enough to write an introduction to one of Douglass's books. Nearly forgotten after his death, this pioneering physician has gradually regained his place in American history.

James McCune Smith was born in New York City on April 18, 1813. His mother had escaped from slavery and raised James as a free person, although he was theoretically a slave in the eyes of the law. James became a top student at African Free School No. 2, one of the New York City institutions dedicated to racial equality through black education. He also became an apprentice blacksmith to help make ends meet.

James really wanted to become a doctor, but American medical colleges wouldn't admit black students. The international anti-slavery community wanted to prove that blacks could succeed in any profession. They persuaded the University of Glasgow in Scotland to admit James to its medical school in 1832. With support from anti-slavery activists in the United Kingdom, he earned his Bachelor's degree in 1835, his Master's in 1836, and his M.D. in 1837. He was the first black American to earn a medical degree.

Dr. James McCune Smith returned to New York in 1837 and began a medical practice. His services for patients of all races ranged from surgery to dentistry, and his office also served as a drugstore. Like many doctors, Smith sought to expand medical knowledge by writing case reports. He published reports in the New York Journal of Medicine but wasn't allowed to read one in person at the New York Medical & Surgical Society. When the Society rejected his membership application, a white colleague read the report for him.

Smith's education gave him the intellectual tools to disprove many racist assumptions about blacks. He felt a moral responsibility to work for racial equality and the abolition of slavery. His scholarship and eloquence made him a leader of the American anti-slavery movement. He used statistics to disprove the claim that slaves lived longer than free blacks. He debunked the pseudo-science of phrenology, which claimed that the shape of black people's skulls limited their intelligence. As an all-around intellectual, Smith was accepted into the American Geographical Society in 1854.

Throughout his life, James McCune Smith served his local black community and the larger black community nationwide. He treated poor children in New York as the physician to the Colored Orphan Asylum. He joined the American Anti-Slavery Society as soon as he returned from Scotland and helped establish blacks as intellectual leaders of the overall anti-slavery movement. He was one of the founders of the Radical Abolition party and was its candidate for secretary of

state of New York in 1857. While he was unsuccessful in politics, Smith's writings on politics and many more topics made him one of the leading black intellectuals of the 19th century.

James McCune Smith lived to see Congress approve the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, but just missed the end of American slavery through its ratification by the states. He died on November 17, 1865, less than one month before the U.S. took the first big step toward realizing his vision of freedom and racial equality.



**Portrait engraving by Patrick H. Reason
from The New-York Historical Society**



New York City consists of five boroughs—The Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island—which were consolidated into a single city in 1898.

To see a map of where the James McCune Smith Pharmacy was located and what building stands there today go to <http://maap.columbia.edu/place/21>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2014.