

# Without Concealment, Without Compromise: The Courageous Lives of Black Civil War Surgeon

Margaret Humphreys  
Duke University, meh@duke.edu

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## Review

Fall of 2023

### Humphreys, Margaret

**Newmark, Jill L.** *Without Concealment, Without Compromise: The Courageous Lives of Black Civil War Surgeons*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2023. PAPER. \$29.95 ISBN 9780809339044 pp. 283

Jill Newmark has left no stone unturned (and no NARA box unplumbed) in sketching the lives of the fourteen Black men who served as surgeons in the Union Army during the American Civil War. Her account reveals the courage it took for these men to face the overt racism and hostility that faced the remarkable phenomenon of Black men in uniform. To a man they were motivated by the desire to serve the needs of the U.S. Colored Troops, which they envisioned as an act of patriotism as well as pride. Newmark describes in detail the rocky path to those medical appointments—first, literacy; second, gaining medical school admission; third finding a place within the Union army hierarchy; and forth, landing in hospitals that would allow them to treat patients of their own race. They gravitated to Howard Medical School and Howard Hospital after the war, as the one place in the country where the Black physician was welcome.

Newmark began the research that resulted in this volume at the National Library of Medicine, where she curated *Binding Wounds, Pushing Boundaries: African Americans in Civil War Medicine* (ca. 2010), an exhibit that first gathered together information about these doctors. The exhibit had a multi-year lifespan as it traveled to libraries across the country. But with the intensive archival research that underpins the current volume she goes far beyond that exhibit in uncovering the lives of these men. The best known, Alexander Augusta, was also the most prominent in the historical record. He had trained at the University of Toronto and was actually

commissioned a full surgeon, which meant he was a major in the army, and outranked all men below him in the regiment. This flabbergasted the white doctors already assigned to the regiment of colored troops, who protested to the highest authorities that they could not be expected to salute such a man. They got their way, and while Augusta remained a major, he was assigned to an intake center for black troops where he had no doctors subordinate to him. The army learned its lesson and hired later Black doctors as non-commissioned contract surgeons on a monthly salary. Augusta went on to be the first leader of Howard University's hospital and medical school.

In 1850 three Black students had been accepted by Harvard Medical School, but the students had rioted, and the school withdrew their offers. No other medical school in the US tried the experiment during the 1850s; interested students had to travel to Canada or Scotland. But during the war this restriction on admission weakened, as it became patriotic in the North to at least admit token numbers of Black students with the expectation that they would be posted to the regiments of Black troops. What had been unimaginable to faculty and students alike, became borderline acceptable. The status of physicians had been elevated by the war, as the governments of both sides granted them officer status and elevated pay for the credential of M.D. This had dampened the many debates about alternative healers, such as homeopaths and Thomsonians, as only "regular" physicians trained in "regular" medical schools were accepted by the military. It may have also dimmed arguments that accepting Black students would tarnish the degrees of their white cohort.

The role of the Black physician in uniform went beyond the care of patients, as important as that was. Walking down the avenue or boarding a streetcar while wearing their uniforms indicating service in the U.S. Army was a bold statement about respectability and

accomplishment. In a country where the overwhelming majority of African American people, especially formerly enslaved people, could not read, that uniform was an overt declaration of literacy and learning. And that Black man in uniform could challenge rules, like the segregation of street cars, with the backing of local military police (in the North). Racism had not, of course, gone away. But the war pushed it somewhat underground in the North. The Black Union surgeons were one visible manifestation of how fast mores were changing.

Their lives were not all success stories, of course. Several got caught in the financial disaster of 1873. And, of course, racism had not, after all, disappeared from the North. Augusta tried and failed to merge his association of African American doctors with the larger white medical society of Washington D.C. Disease and injury acquired during the war limited later lives, and these physicians learned to their dismay that contract surgeons had few pension or disability rights. The loss of support for Howard University and Hospital in the 1870s limited medical student access, professional opportunities, and medical care. But the school did persist.

There is far too much detail here for one short review to encompass. The book is almost entirely based on archival sources and can serve as a model for how to engage a new topic about the Civil War. Newmark's collective biography is an impressive contribution to the growing literature on African Americans in the Civil War North.

*Margaret Humphreys is the Josiah Charles Trent Professor of the History of Medicine at Duke University. She is the author of *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldiers in the American Civil War* (2008); *Marrow of Tragedy: The Health Crisis of the American Civil War* (2013), and *Searching for Dr. Harris: The Life and Times of a Remarkable African American Physician* (forthcoming, 2024).*