



**Honoring First African American Women Graduates  
Yale School of Medicine Bicentennial 1810-2010**

**Dr. Beatrix McCleary Hamburg  
First African American Woman Graduate  
Yale School of Medicine 1948**

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June 2011**





*Sterling Hall of Medicine  
Yale School of Medicine ca. 1940*

## **Dr. Beatrix Ann McCleary Hamburg First African American Woman Graduate Yale School of Medicine 1948**

In the fall of 1944, Beatrix Ann McCleary, a Vassar College graduate from New York City, joined fifty-four men and three women to form the first year class at Yale School of Medicine (YSM). Perhaps unknown to her fellow classmates, she was the first African American woman to enroll at YSM and would become the first African American student to earn a Yale medical degree in nearly one-half century. As she progressed to her M.D., awarded in 1948, she encountered an equable academic and social environment ideally suited to her talents and career ambitions. Her smooth passage through the Yale classrooms, laboratories and clinics belied prevailing biases and assumptions that historically had restricted or excluded qualified African American and other minority groups from careers in medicine.

After leaving Yale, Dr. Beatrix McCleary Hamburg would surmount future challenges with remarkable success, rising to the top echelons of academic medicine as she defined new paradigms in research and models of clinical care for diagnosis and treatment in child psychiatry. Her work, especially in preventing violence among children, has drawn international recognition, honors and praise. She is an elected member of the Institute of Medicine, the American Association of the Advancement of Science, and the Royal Society of Medicine of London.

Nearly a century separated Dr. Hamburg from YSM's first African American graduate Cortlandt Van Rensselaer Creed in 1857. In providing medical training for Creed and McCleary, YSM had countered prevailing race- and gender-based discriminatory practices that dominated admissions to U.S. medical schools from their earliest origins well into the mid-20th century.<sup>1</sup> McCleary's story is of particular interest because of the impressive personal strength and ambition she brought to bear against rigid institutional and social barriers while opening new pathways of progress for women in medicine and the academy.



*Beatrix Ann McCleary,  
Vassar undergraduate,  
about 1942. Courtesy of  
Vassar College.*

### McCleary Applies to Yale School of Medicine

Members of the YSM Admissions Committee who interviewed Beatrix "Betty" McCleary, impressed by the intelligence and personal qualities of the "vivacious" and "engaging" applicant, registered positive support for her admission. The Committee chair and Assistant Dean, Dr. Gordon H. Smith, was favorably inclined to accept McCleary but insisted that sanction from "higher authorities" would be needed. Although concerned about potential exposure to charges of racial bias if McCleary's admission were denied, Smith agonized even more about racial discord that might follow the integration of a black medical student into New Haven Hospital wards and clinics.<sup>2</sup> An informal and unwritten but rigorously applied policy had excluded black students from admission to the medical school for almost half a century.<sup>3,4</sup> McCleary appeared to know nothing of these concerns and emphasized that she was not bent on breaking down doors, but intent on finding the best opportunity available to pursue medical training. A Vassar education would surely count in her favor given Yale's sisterly ties to Vassar. YSM was McCleary's logical and first choice of medical schools.

McCleary's admission became official when Dean of Medicine, Francis Gilman Blake, signaled his approval and initialed her admission record. Her letter of admission followed. With no fanfare or pronouncement,

the Yale School of Medicine in 1944 joined a small group of private medical schools that had admitted black women. In the Northeast, only the medical schools of Tufts, Boston and Columbia Universities had preceded Yale. Three years after Yale, Harvard Medical School admitted its first African American woman, Mildred Jefferson.<sup>5</sup> At Johns Hopkins where women had pioneered in important roles as students and faculty members as early as the 1880s, black women would not be admitted until the 1960s. A generation would pass after Hamburg's admission to Yale before the majority of U.S. medical schools admitted black women.<sup>6</sup>

McCleary's admission signaled a more responsive attitude of YSM's admissions committee to black applicants who followed. The next two African American graduates of YSM were also women, Yvette Faye Francis (YSM '50)<sup>7</sup> and Doris Louise Wethers (YSM '52).<sup>8</sup> Like McCleary, Francis and



*Yvette Faye Francis and Doris Louise Wethers at Yale in 1950.*

Wethers were talented students who had prepared for college in Harlem public schools. Both graduated with honors from New York City College campuses, Hunter and Queens. With the admission of these three black women, YSM embarked on an unfaltering course that transformed the

ethnic and gender representation in its medical student classes. Since the graduation of McCleary, Francis and Wethers in the mid-20th century, YSM has awarded M.D. degrees to over 400 African American men and women, an average of twelve students per year (in classes of 100 students) over the past four decades.

### **Before McCleary, African American Men Admitted to Yale**

Before YSM's role in advancing careers of black women in medicine, Yale was first among the major medical training institutions in the U.S. to graduate black men. In 1857, a time of strong abolitionist and egalitarian sentiments in New Haven and among Yale faculty, YSM awarded an M.D. to Cortlandt Van Rensselaer Creed, a New Haven black student educated in the John Lovell Lancasterian School, forerunner of public education in New Haven. In contrast to clamorous opposition from medical students, faculty and the Boston press that forced Harvard to dismiss three black students admitted in 1850, Creed's matriculation and graduation at Yale provoked no overt resistance or public comment. He wrote in a letter to Frederick Douglass, "The truth compels me to say, that I never experienced any other than the most polite treatment from my fellow class-mates."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Dr. Creed could not ignore the foreboding signs as America, already cleaved by pro- and anti-slavery ideologies, approached the breach of civil war. Putting a positive spin on a realistic appraisal of his future career, he wrote to Douglass, "I rather think of spending a year or more in Europe, and shall settle down in practice either in Jamaica or Liberia." In fact, history's tide would carry him a few years later to honorable service in the Civil War as an Assistant Surgeon. After the War, Dr. Creed remained in New Haven, except for a brief period in New York, and established a successful practice as physician and surgeon until his death in 1900.<sup>10</sup>

Creed was the first African American graduate of any of the Yale departments and professional schools. Other African Americans followed Creed to Yale, including Edward Alexander Bouchet, a New Haven student who in 1876 upon receiving a Ph.D. in physics from Yale became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in any field from an American university, and the sixth person ever to earn the Ph.D. in the Western Hemisphere. Small numbers of black students received Yale degrees throughout the last decades of the 19th century. Ten African American men were awarded Yale medical degrees while other black students carried home degrees from Yale College, the graduate school and the professional departments of Law and Divinity. Recorded recollections of black students from that era were generally positive and appreciative of the

advantages gained. One student who found a comfortable niche at Yale reflected, "I liked the fine democratic spirit therein; my color was nothing in my favor, and nothing against me."<sup>11</sup>

### **Early 20th Century – Race, Religion and Gender Define Place and Opportunity at YSM**

The favorable signs of African American progress at Yale ended on the medical school campus in 1903 when YSM graduated its last African American student until Dr. Hamburg's achievement forty-five years later. As racial segregation in 20th century American society solidified around Jim Crow laws and discriminatory social customs, medical education remained largely segregated. Few predominantly white medical schools accepted black men or women. The historically black medical schools, Meharry and Howard Medical Colleges, supplied the great majority of black physicians to minority communities and black hospitals in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>12</sup> And it was neither a matter of chance nor the weight of time long overdue that opened YSM's door to Beatrix McCleary in 1944. Ethnic and racial exclusionary practices on the medical campus already had been challenged in the years preceding Hamburg's application, and Yale had been found wanting and vulnerable in its own defense.

As a woman and an African American, McCleary's admission to medical school had very few precedents. African American women of earlier generations had had almost no access to formal medical training. There were exceptions. Dr. Rebecca (Lee) Crumpler of Charlestown, Massachusetts, graduated from New England Medical Female College in 1864 and practiced in Boston before moving to Virginia after the Civil War. Dr. Rebecca J. Cole of Philadelphia obtained her M.D. from Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1867.<sup>13</sup> Only a small number of African American women were able to emulate their examples in the following years and decades. Between 1900 and 1940, fewer than five black women on average received medical degrees in the United States each year. Most trained at Howard and Meharry Medical Colleges.<sup>14</sup> Quotas and biases constrained admission of all women in the male-dominated profession.

Shortly before World War I, YSM admitted its first three white women, most prominently Louise Farnam, a Yale faculty member's daughter and graduate of Vassar College. Farnam graduated at the top of her medical school class in 1920, trained in pediatrics, and devoted ten years of missionary service on the faculty of a Yale-sponsored medical school in Changsha, China.<sup>15</sup> Over the next two decades, enrollment of

women at YSM averaged about five percent of entering classes, an era when YSM admissions practices restricted the admission of women, Jews, Italian Catholics and ethnic minorities. In summarizing YSM's admissions policies for an internally distributed memorandum, registrar Miriam K. Dasey wrote, "The number of women is restricted; students trained in some religious institutions where the viewpoint has proven too narrow, are limited, as are some racial groups."<sup>16</sup> In fact, African Americans were shut out completely at the medical and nursing schools by an unwritten policy (discussed below) grounded in fears of interracial patient-physician conflict in Yale affiliated hospital wards and clinics. Prejudicial admissions practices prevailed at YSM through the first four decades of the 20th century, even as African American students enrolled in small numbers in Yale College and other Yale professional and graduate programs, including the School of Public Health (then a department of the medical school) under the leadership of C.E.A. Winslow.<sup>17</sup>

### 1940s - A Time of Change

Reopening YSM to African Americans would turn on changes within the School and across the larger society. The 1940s brought new leadership to YSM, Dean Francis Gilman Blake. Blake, a highly respected clinician and researcher, worked hard to consolidate Yale's influential position in academic medicine after several decades of regenerative institutional growth. Before Blake, a succession of deans - and especially Milton Winternitz - had successfully increased the endowment, built new research and clinical facilities, recruited outstanding faculty, and transformed the medical educational program into today's "Yale System." By 1940, YSM had found a secure place among the leading medical institutions of the era, as Abraham Flexner had foreseen in his 1910 *Report on Medical Education in the U.S. and Canada*. In commenting on Harvard and Yale medical schools, Flexner noted, "To these two institutions the future of medical education in New England may for many years to come be safely left."<sup>18</sup>

To remain competitive with peer institutions, YSM had already begun the transition to a more meritocratic system of evaluating student candidates for admission and in recruiting its full time faculty. Jews, Catholics and immigrants



New Haven Hospital ca. 1940.

gained positions on the faculty in increasing numbers as the school sharpened its focus on securing the best available talent. Competition for seats at YSM intensified among top prospective student applicants.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a new generation of black students with high aspirations was emerging from historically black southern colleges and northern urban public educational institutions. It was a hopeful generation, tempered by the economic hardships of the Great Depression and inspired by the rallying cry, "Educational Inequalities Must Go," voiced by Charles H. Houston, the eminent Howard University Law School Dean and NAACP desegregation legal strategist.<sup>19</sup>

The 1940s also marked the entry of the United States into World War II. As Allied troops united in Europe and Asia against fascist and racist ideologies, African Americans on the home front pressed more forcefully in challenging entrenched racial discrimination. At a time

when the armed forces were still segregated, editors of the black press and civil rights groups championed a "Double V" campaign, the defeat of fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home. Meanwhile, the legal attack on segregated education, begun in 1933 by the NAACP, gained momentum.

In the North and South, black students were encouraged to apply for seats in the nation's predominantly or exclusively white public and private educational institutions. Against this backdrop of wartime social ferment over issues of long-standing racial injustices, McCleary would build her case for admission to YSM - a decade before the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against

segregation in public schools and a full generation before the Affirmative Action policies of the late 1960s.

### Beatrix McCleary's Preparation for Vassar and Yale

Dr. Hamburg's path to academic success had strong foundations in family, church and community. Born in 1925 in Jacksonville Florida, she was the daughter of a successful black physician, Dr. Minor Francis McCleary, a 1901 graduate of Meharry Medical College.<sup>20</sup> His premature death in 1925 endowed Beatrix with an early passion to pursue a medical



*Dr. Minor F. McCleary's graduating medical school class, Meharry Medical College 1901 catalogue. McCleary is on top row, second from left.*



career. The family relocated to Harlem in New York and lived with her maternal grandfather, the Reverend Robert R. Downs, a venerated A.M.E. church leader and editor of its influential monthly publication, "Voice of Missions." Her mother, Beatrix Downs McCleary, became a well-known community leader and activist in Harlem, heading social, political and cultural groups committed to racial uplift.<sup>21</sup>

After a strong academic start in Harlem primary schools, McCleary applied to the Country School of Julia Richman High School with support from her teachers and mentors. The Country School, so-called by its principal to project the cachet of a selective private school, was, in fact, a small subdivision of a large, socially and ethnically diverse urban public high school.<sup>22</sup> The honor school-within-a-school provided an academic haven for selectively chosen students (by exam) who were encouraged to aim for admission to elite private colleges.<sup>23</sup> Located on Manhattan's Upper East Side, only a few subway stops from McCleary's Harlem residence, the all girls' Country School was not commonly within the academic reach of a black student from Harlem. It would become the mission of a spirited African American clergyman to bridge the distance from Harlem to New York's Upper East Side and ultimately to Vassar and Yale.

Beatrix McCleary's rising academic star had crossed the discerning gaze of Reverend James H. Robinson during his activist ministry at Harlem's Church of the Master whose congregation included the McCleary family. Robinson, a Union Seminary trained clergyman and future founder of Operation Crossroads Africa, preached a doctrine of interfaith and interracial discourse.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1930s while speaking at a YWCA conference on the Vassar College campus, he asked pointedly why Vassar, the oldest of the Seven Sisters colleges, was so long delayed in admitting black women, all of the other sister schools already having acted to remove racial barriers. Vassar students responded that no qualified black students had applied. Likely with Beatrix McCleary in mind, Robinson promised to send Vassar a black applicant of intellectual and personal merit.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever the academic qualifications a black woman might have for admission to Vassar, she would still have to navigate a socially self-conscious campus climate that had earned Vassar the distinction of being, in the estimation of W. E B Dubois, "the leading college of snobbery" in the country.<sup>26</sup> Robinson's gambit in challenging Vassar to consider a black student paid off. McCleary applied in 1940 and the gates of Vassar finally opened to its first self-identified black applicant, nearly eighty years after the college's founding. Having unassumingly broken through

what at the time was a seemingly impossible high glass ceiling for black women, McCleary quickly mastered Vassar's social intricacies and rigorous academic standards. A year after graduation, she commented in a Vassar alumnae publication, "Background, intelligence and ability are more important than color in making good members of the college community."<sup>27</sup> Five other black women followed her to Vassar during her four years on the campus. By the time of her application to Yale, she had garnered top honors in zoology, a Phi Beta Kappa key, and the esteem of Vassar faculty members who sent along high praise in support of her admission to Yale.



*The Vassar College Lawn in the 1940s. Courtesy of Vassar College.*

McCleary, who had a long-standing passion to pursue medicine and psychiatry, knew that her preparation for Yale had been exceptional. Without dwelling on thoughts of the path breaking implications of applying to Yale, she expected only that she would be judged fairly. Oddly fortuitous circumstances at Yale would help serve to ensure this end.

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### **Yale Unwittingly Prepares for McCleary**

Two years before McCleary's application to YSM, the University had been stung by accusations of racially exclusionary admission practices on the medical campus. Yale School of Nursing had declined to interview an African American student and Spelman College graduate, the daughter of a prominent, Harvard graduate and president of Atlanta University. The controversy rallied national black civil rights organizations and focused unflattering attention on the School of Nursing Dean, Effie J. Taylor. Yale University President, Charles Seymour, intervened to defend the University.<sup>28</sup>

In explaining to President Seymour the basis for an "unwritten policy" of excluding Negro applicants from admission to the Medical and Nursing Schools, Dean Taylor wrote,

"I consulted with Dean Blake ... and have had my former impressions corroborated, which is that Negro students are not accepted in that School ... [The] differences between the Medical and Nursing Schools and the Divinity School in accepting Negro students ... lies in the necessity in both the schools of Medicine and Nursing for assignment of students to a clinical field where the situation might readily become complicated,

and where adjustments might be exceedingly difficult.”

Jane M. Bolin, LL.B. '31, a New York City family court judge, weighed in on behalf of the Spelman student in a letter to President Seymour. Fittingly, Judge Bolin was the first African American woman to graduate from Yale Law School and the first black woman to receive a judicial appointment in the United States.<sup>29</sup> She lambasted her alma mater for its attempt “to uproot the very bases of our American Civilization and make way for the totalitarian scheme of life which condemns certain racial groups permanently to a subservient and inferior status.”

Reverend Anson Phelps Stokes, former Secretary of Yale College and staunch advocate of African American educational progress, counseled Seymour in cautious terms. “I would be sorry to see the University attacked in the public press on the issue, especially as I feel that it would be difficult to explain satisfactorily the position of the School of Nursing as expressed by Dean Taylor.” Stokes urged Seymour to seek a “*modus vivendi*.” Ultimately, the Spelman student withdrew her application, but not without hard feelings and misgivings among those involved. The University could have done better, a Yale insider concluded, a thought surely on the minds of some involved with YSM admissions when McCleary’s application was discussed in 1944.

Acknowledging the undeniable merit of McCleary’s academic record and yielding to a more progressive and chastened institutional climate on issues of race, YSM admitted Beatrix McCleary. Arriving for the School’s opening on September 25, 1944, she embraced the challenge of her pioneering role with self-contained assurance that would carry her through four years of happy and productive experiences in the self-directed “Yale System” of medical education. For claiming her seat at Yale, the black press celebrated and the news echoed through the Harlem community. At Yale School of Medicine, an African American woman had been admitted, a first.



*YSM Class of 1948 on graduation day. McCleary is fourth from left in the first row.*

### **Beatrix McCleary Hamburg Pursues A Career in Child Psychiatry After Yale**

Upon graduating from YSM in 1948, McCleary began two years in internship and residency at Grace-New Haven Hospital and the Yale Psychiatric Institute before moving to Chicago to pursue additional clinical

and research training. Now focused on an interest in child psychiatry, her career path led to Chicago's Children's Hospital and the Institute for Juvenile Research. Before leaving Yale, she met and later married Dr. David Alan Hamburg, a graduate of Indiana Medical School with whom she also established a life-long academic collaboration. By 1961, with two children in tow, Dr. Hamburg had settled into her first academic appointment as a Research Associate at Stanford Medical School. In the following years, she rapidly ascended the academic faculty ladder with professorial appointments at Stanford, Harvard and Mt. Sinai.

Dr. Hamburg's research and clinical practice in child psychiatry focused on behavioral and developmental issues among adolescents, especially minority children. In her early research, she was drawn to problems of teenage violence and bullying. Her insights led to the development of novel, school-based peer counseling programs that proved to be effective interventions and since have been widely applied in conflict resolution work. Her research expanded to other areas of adolescent development and minority mental health. As a clinician, she served as chief of psychiatric services at Harvard and Mt. Sinai and played an active role in guiding national mental health policies. In 1992 she began a six-year term as president of the William T. Grant Foundation where she supported funding of research to foster healthy lives and reduce violence among children.<sup>30</sup>



*Dr. Beatrix Ann Hamburg in 1997.*

The recipient of numerous professional honors and awards, Dr. Hamburg is currently the DeWitt Wallace Distinguished Scholar at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University. She is an elected member to the Institute of Medicine and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She and her husband, Dr. David A. Hamburg, former President of the Carnegie Foundation, continue their life-long partnership and devotion to solving problems of violence. They are parents of Dr. Margaret A. Hamburg, former New York City Health Commissioner and current Director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and Eric N. Hamburg, a documentary film producer, director and writer. One of their granddaughters will enter Yale College this fall, the second representative of the Hamburg family to attend Yale.

Although Dr. Beatrix Hamburg has spent a lifetime rejecting labels and fighting stereotypes, she acknowledges her numerous firsts with a

mixture of pride and humility along with a personal plea to not place her on a pedestal, however modest in size. She has broken through many barriers, not always evident, but emblematic of our society's troubled history of denying equality of access and opportunity to ethnic minorities and women. In the bicentennial year of its founding, Yale School of Medicine honors Dr. Beatrix Hamburg for her trailblazing role as the first African American woman to graduate from YSM, a legacy that inaugurated the school's modern era of commitment to racial diversity. Her exemplary career embodies the YSM's mission to educate future leaders who will advance scholarship, knowledge, and patient care in medicine.

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### **Acknowledgements**

The information and events discussed in this article draw in part from the pioneering historical study by Dr. Daryl Keith Daniels in his 1991 Yale Medical School thesis, "African-Americans at the Yale University School of Medicine: 1810-1961" (Ref. 1). His scholarship identified the African American graduates of Yale Medical School and placed their lives and achievements in the context of one institution's struggle to reconcile internal and external dissonance over issues of race. Professor Curtis L. Patton of Yale provided invaluable insights and editorial assistance. Images are reproduced from Yale University archives, Vassar College, and public domain sources. The graphic of the African Sankofa bird is used with the permission of Dr. Sylvia Lafair, author of "Don't Bring It to Work: Breaking the Family Patterns That Limit Success," (Jossey Bass). Dr. Lafair is the President of CEO, Inc. (Creative Energy Options, Inc.), [www.ceoptions.com](http://www.ceoptions.com).



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