



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1969

Extracted on Apr-19-2024 12:30:19

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Old Taylor Presents: Ingenious Americans

Dr. Daniel Hale Williams (1858-1931)

Just 28 years after the end of slavery, a black surgeon performed the first successful heart operation.

1893. Memories of the Civil War were still fresh. black Americans were just beginning to get used to the idea of freedom. Few of them were able to pursue a higher education.

But already some black Americans were reshaping not only their own country, but the world. Seventy-five years before an African Negro gave his heart for the first successful human-heart transplant, an American Negro performed the world's first successful heart operation.

It happened on a cold, windy night, when a knifing victim was rushed to Chicago's Provident Hospital. The wound was a fraction of an inch from the man's heart.

Under the medical conditions of 1893, the man was almost a sure goner. X-rays weren't yet discovered. Blood transfusions were practically unknown. There were no modern "miracle drugs."

Yet, with incredible skill, Dr. Williams attempted the long shot. And his patient became the first man to survive a heart operation.

Had it been any other hospital or any other surgeon, the man might have died within the hour. "Sewed up the human heart," headlined a Chicago newspaper.

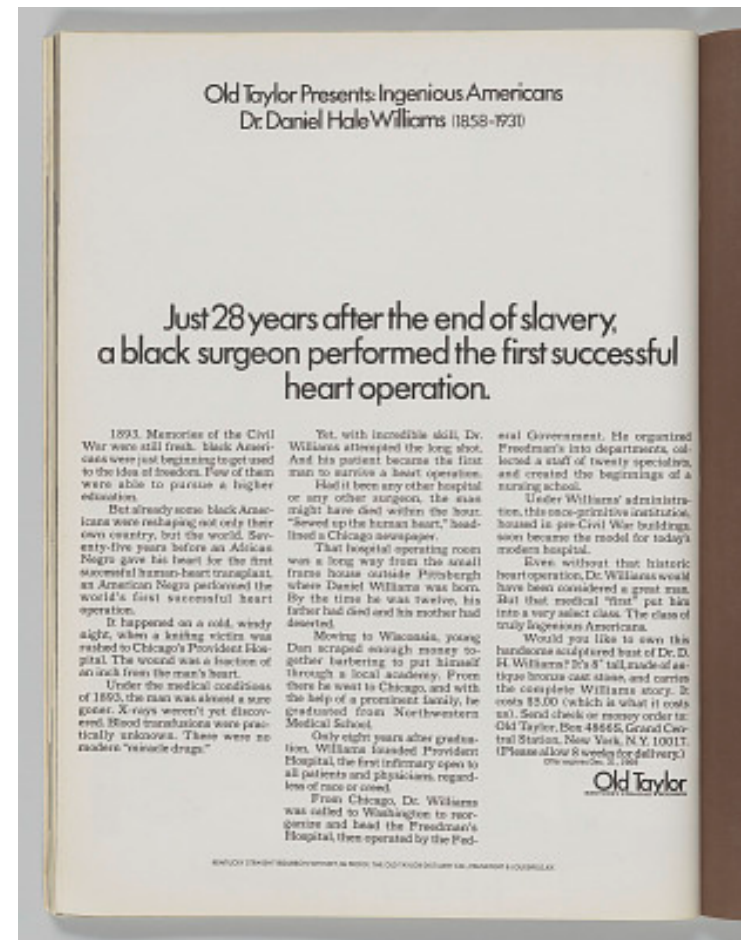
That hospital operating room was a long way from the small frame house outside Pittsburgh where Daniel Williams was born. By the time he was twelve, his father had died and his mother had deserted.

Moving to Wisconsin, young Dan scraped enough money together barbering to put himself through a local academy. From there he went to Chicago, and with the help of a prominent family, he graduated from Northwestern Medical School.

Only eight years after graduation, Williams founded Provident Hospital, the first infirmary open to all patients and physicians, regardless of race or creed.

From Chicago, Dr. Williams was called to Washington to reorganize and head the Freedman's Hospital, then operated by the Federal Government. He organized Freedman's into departments, collected a staff of twenty specialists, and created the beginnings of a nursing school.

Under Williams' administration, this once-primitive institution, housed in pre-Civil War buildings, soon became the model for today's modern hospital.



Even without that historic heart operation, Dr. Williams would have been considered a great man. But that medical "first" put him into a very select class. The class of truly Ingenious Americans.

Would you like to own this handsome sculptured bust of Dr. D. H. Williams? It's 8" tall, made of antique bronze cast stone, and carries the complete Williams story. It costs \$5.00 (which is what it costs us). Send check or money order to: Old Taylor, Box 4866S, Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y. 10017. (Please allow 8 weeks for delivery.) Offer expires Dec. 31, 1969

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