

Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler 1831-1895: The First African-American Female Physician

Written by Crystal R. Emery
Wednesday, 20 July 2016 17:26



[Rebecca Lee Crumpler](#) challenged the prejudice that prevented Black Americans from pursuing careers in [medicine](#) to become the [first Black](#) woman in the United States to earn an [MD degree](#)

. Although little has survived to tell the story of her life, Dr. Crumpler secured her place in the historical record with her two-volume book, [The Book of Medical Discourses](#), published in 1883.

Miss Crumpler was born a free woman of color in 1831 in Delaware. Early in her life she moved to Pennsylvania, living with her aunt, "whose usefulness with the sick was continually sought". At that time "I early conceived a liking for, and sought every opportunity to relieve the sufferings of others," she wrote.

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By 1852 Dr. Crumpler had moved to Charlestown, Massachusetts, where she worked as a nurse for the next eight years. In 1860, with the help of written recommendations from the doctors she worked with, she was admitted to the New England Female Medical College. When she graduated in 1864, Dr. Crumpler was the first Black woman in the United States to earn an MD degree and the only Black woman to graduate from the New England Female Medical College, which closed in 1873.

Dr. Crumpler practiced in Boston for a short while, working mostly with poor women and children. When the Civil War ended in 1865, she moved to Richmond, Virginia, believing it would be "a proper field for real missionary work, and one that would present ample opportunities to become acquainted with the diseases of women and children." Working with the Freedmen's Bureau, she joined other Black physicians caring for freed slaves who would otherwise have had no access to [medical](#) care. She experienced "[intense racism](#)": "men doctors" snubbed her, druggists balked at filling her prescriptions, and some people wisecracked that the MD behind her name stood for nothing more than "Mule Drive."

"At the close of my services in that city" she explained, "I returned to my former home, Boston, where I entered into the work with renewed vigor." By 1880 Dr. Crumpler had moved to Hyde Park, Massachusetts, and was no longer in active practice when she wrote her book three years later. She was married to Mr. Arthur Crumpler.

The text above is an excerpt of the book [Against All Odds: Celebrating Black Women in Medicine](#)

The book can be bought here:

<http://www.changingthefaceofmedicine.org/orderbook/against-all-odds>

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The trailer of the companion documentary can be seen here <http://www.changingthefaceofmedicine.org/film/>

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About the author: [Crystal R. Emery](#) is a talented filmmaker. She was featured today on the prestigious *Time Magazine*: <http://time.com/4401986/black-disabled-woman-power/>

. She is also a passionate producer, writer, director and activist. Her first feature length documentary was "The Deadliest Disease in America" which addresses racism in healthcare practices. This film made her earn the Congressional Black Caucus Health Brain Trust Award in Journalism. Mrs. Emery has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Connecticut. More recently, she got a Master of Arts in Media Studies from the New School for Public Engagement. She collaborated with Bill Duke for *A Rage in Harlem*.

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