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The 1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute and the Admission of African American Students

Doris Y. Wilkinson

In the fall of 1850 the Harvard Medical School admitted, at the request of the American Colonization Society, two young African American men who stated their intention to practice in Liberia. An even bolder step was taken in accepting a thirty-eight-year-old African American who planned to practice in this country. In addition, Dean Oliver Wendell Holmes and his colleagues seriously considered admitting a forty-five-year-old woman. It is tempting to speculate on the consequences for the country, had Holmes and the medical faculty stood by their initial decision. They did not, however. After protests, the woman was urged to withdraw her application, and the African American students were not permitted to continue beyond the term.

Rich documentation exists on the sequence of events and on the arguments put forth by both the opponents and proponents of permitting the African American students to obtain a medical education at Harvard. In addition to letters, signed petitions, and faculty minutes, two articles appeared in a Boston newspaper, the *Boston Daily Journal*. The first was published on 17 December 1850. Its very publication—and the pseudonym of “Common Sense”—indicates that much of the reasoning behind the opposition to the African Americans was tacitly accepted by the “community generally,” a term employed by Common Sense.

[For the Boston Journal.]
THE MEDICAL COLLEGE.

MR EDITOR:—The usually grave and dignified halls of the Medical College were the scene of some little excitement last week. It seems that at the commencement of the lectures, two colored persons were found to be of the number of students. This

DORIS WILKINSON was a Visiting Scholar in the W. E. B. DuBois Institute from 1989–90 and a Visiting Professor in the Harvard Summer School in 1992. Professor Wilkinson was selected Distinguished Professor for 1992–93 by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky.

The events of the fall of 1850 at the Harvard Medical School have been recounted. They were noted briefly in Thomas Francis Harrington, *The Harvard Medical School: A History, Narrative and Documentary* (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1905). Henry Beecher and Mark D. Altschule, in a thorough volume on *Medicine at Harvard: The First Three Hundred Years* (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1977), 475–79, recounted the events of 1850, with a number of the documents reprinted. See also Philip Cash, “Pride, Prejudice, and Politics,” *Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin* 54 (December 1980): 20–25. The present article emphasizes the various documents, printing them in full. It has been supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Travel to Collections Program grant.

Harvard librarians have understood the historical value of my research and have fostered its dissemination. The staff of the Rare Books Department of the Countway Library of the Harvard Medical School were most helpful in making resources available. With other staff in Widener, including Barbara Burg, and the University Archives in Pusey, Pamela Matz, Curator of Exhibitions for the Charles and Mary Tanenbaum Program, helped mount an exhibition for Black History Month in 1990. I am grateful to Kenneth Carpenter for going beyond editorial duty and sharing the results of his scouring of Harvard libraries and archives for added pieces to the story. His efforts enhanced the description and interpretation of this important historical interval.

occasioned a good deal of feeling in the school; but in a few weeks another black made his appearance, and, anon, the report was circulated that a *woman* had taken tickets for the lectures! The pent up indignation now broke forth, and two series of resolutions were passed, remonstrating against this amalgamation of sexes and races. The one series, respecting the female Æsculapius, was unanimously carried by the meeting held for the purpose. The other series did not meet with the same unanimity—not because the presence of blacks was agreeable to any, but because some were opposed to agitating a matter that was liable to bring out the feelings of an excitable portion of the community, and others were unwilling to call into question the proceedings of the Faculty of the College. However, the resolutions were passed by a large majority, and sent to the Faculty. A protest was got up by the minority and sent in likewise.

The Faculty considered the resolutions, and returned a report to the class. By some eloquence of persuasion the *lady* had been induced to forego her intention,—in this respect, it appears, an exception to her sex as in others! So that no further action, it was stated, was deemed necessary. The blacks had their tickets, and could not be deprived of them, was the substance of the report in their case; so that the question for the future is still an open one, unless this year is to establish a precedent. If this is to be a precedent it should be distinctly understood.

When the present students made their arrangements to attend the lectures, and more or less subjected themselves to the necessity of abiding by their arrangements, it was fair for them to suppose from the silence of the college catalogue upon the matter, and from the generally understood opinions of the community, that they would be brought into contact with no *class* of persons, whose presence would be repugnant to their well-founded prejudices and convictions of propriety. But when they found themselves deceived, or mistaken, and were annoyed by having blacks crowded in among them, they were right in uttering their remonstrance. They did not wish to be presumptive, but it would seem that justice, not to mention courtesy, could scarcely ask less than that their feelings should have been consulted in a matter concerning them personally in so eminent a degree. Let it be that they were affected by prejudice, still it was an honest prejudice, and such as has urged upon the people of this city the propriety and wise policy of interdicting the mingling of blacks with white children in the public schools.

A portion, at least, of the medical professors of the school, do not hesitate to avow their opinion of the inferior capacity of the negro race, and it is not to be supposed that the students would be willing to be classed with blacks, whom they themselves, their professors, and the community generally, consider to be of inferior mental ability. Why, what is a diploma from an institution worth? Its value is just in the proportion to the estimation in which the institution is held by the public. For the reputation of the school, then, it is to be hoped that the professors will not graduate their instructions according to their estimation of the intellectual abilities of the negro races; at least not until the number of blacks preponderate!

Suppose the case altered, and, instead of colored students attending the lectures, a colored professor appointed to deliver a portion of them. What would be the result in this case? No one can for a moment doubt that the whole faculty would to a man indignantly resign the posts they now hold. But why? They would need to have no further *social* relation with a black professor, than white students will have with a black. Methinks “the name of the thing” would have *some* weight, and an inherent prejudice a *good deal*. Will they not have weight in determining the number of white students in future?

As medical men, the students would deprecate the imputation of being influenced by the sentiments of any religious creed, or political party, in their aversion to the society of blacks. They have an earnest hope that, if possible, they may as a race be elevated. It is not for the physician to crush any. It is his mission to heal the sick and relieve the suffering, whatever may be the color or condition of the afflicted. Let blacks be educated for any—for all professions, to practice here, to practice in their native Africa; but do not *compel* white men to become martyrs, and to fraternize with them. If any choose it, be it so. If any protest against it, their prejudices and feelings as white men should be respected.

COMMON SENSE¹

¹ An undated copy is in a file at the Countway Library Archives. Its author is not known, but apparently was a student.

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... Boston, Dec. 17, 1850. SOLOMON PIPER.

[For the Boston Journal.]
THE MEDICAL COLLEGE.

Ma ERROR:—The usually grave and dignified halls of
the Medical College were the scene of some little ex-
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the lectures, two colored persons were found to be of the
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COMMON SENSE.

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Figure 1. With this article in the Boston Daily Journal of 17 December 1850, the dispute at the Medical School became public. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

Two days later, on 19 December 1850, a supporter of the African American students published in the *Boston Daily Journal* "The Other Side," a rebuttal to *Common Sense*, though one written, as the author stated, out of "considerations of duty." It is reprinted here in full, just as are the other documents of the fall of 1850.

[For the Boston Journal.]

THE OTHER SIDE

MR. EDITOR:—Allow me, as a member of the Medical Class of Harvard College, to correct what I conceive to be a misrepresentation of important facts, in the communication of your correspondent "Common Sense," published in the Journal of Tuesday evening.

I will state as briefly as possible, my assertions in regard to recent occurrences at the Medical College. If your correspondent sees fit to dispute these assertions, the facts upon which they are founded, can be produced.

The resolutions opposing the admission of colored students, to which "Common Sense" alludes, were passed by a majority of students present at a small adjourned meeting. A majority of the Class disapprove those resolutions, and, as "Common Sense" well knows, have publicly so expressed themselves.

When "Common Sense" came, with the unmanly prejudices he describes, to ask an education from Harvard Medical College, it was fully understood what the position of that college is in respect to differences of color, a black student having there received his education, with the express consent of the government, at Cambridge, several years since; while the principle implied in this course was known to be that held by the medical college of New England, and one upon which these institutions (Pittsfield College in this State, and the venerable Dartmouth may be instanced,) had repeatedly acted.

If "Common Sense" will show that it is no more difficult for the State to establish a suitable medical college for blacks, than it is for the city to provide a separate grammar school for this class, his argument from this analogy will be entitled to consideration.

A single professor has indeed mentioned the alleged inferiority of the African race; but, if the kind and considerate language in which the allusion was made, and the touching tribute to the virtues and excellencies of that race, which accompanied the remark, could be here given, they would be found to do honor to the heart as well as the tongue of one of whom American science and American letters are alike justly proud, certainly they would not warrant the use which "Common Sense" has endeavored to make of this opinion.

Lastly, every medical student would probably prefer the company of intelligent white students to that of black; but your correspondent is mistaken, if he supposes that educated New England men, old or young, will dishonor the soil on which they were born, or the ancestors from whom they spring, by holding that differences of color or race can affect the public rights, above all the right to education, of any citizen.

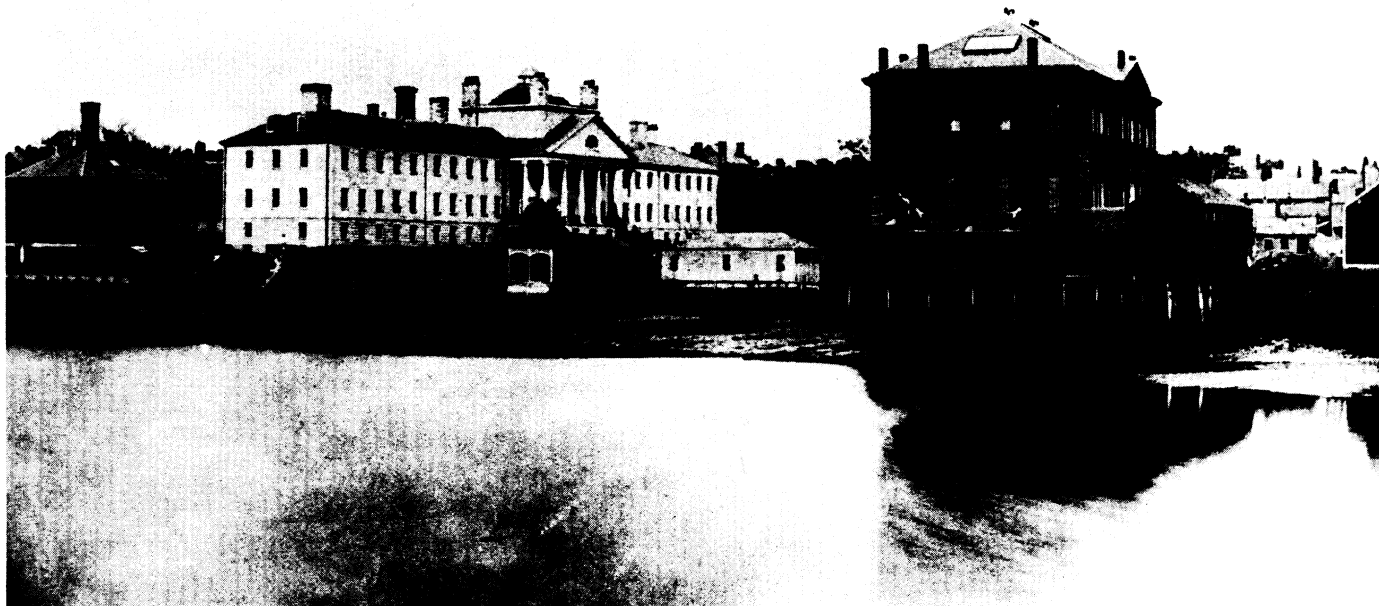
In opposition to the earnestly expressed wish of all parties in the Class, "Common Sense" has thought it proper to drag the details of a private disagreement into the public prints. Considerations of duty demanded the reply that has now been made. It will be the fault of others than the writer, if this discussion is any farther prolonged.

CHEESHAHTEAUMUCK, INDUS.

The dispute was about three students of African ancestry. Two were sponsored by the Massachusetts Colonization Society: Daniel Laing, Jr.,² and Isaac Humphrey

² Martin R. Delany, in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1852), 135, wrote of Laing: "Daniel Laing, Jr., Esq., a fine intellectual young gentleman of Boston, a

student also of Dr. Clarke of that city, one of the Surgeons of the Massachusetts General Hospital, who attended the course of Lectures the session of 1850-51, at the Medical School of Harvard University, is now in Paris, to spend



Snowden.³ Martin R. Delany entered independently.⁴ The woman referred to is Harriot K. Hunt.⁵

two years in the hospitals, and attend the Medical Lectures of that great seat of learning. Mr. Laing, like most medical students, has ever been an admirer, and anxious to sit under the teachings of that great master in Surgery, Velpeau." Laing, as noted by Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robison Delany 1812–1885* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971), finished his medical studies at Dartmouth. He died in Charleston in 1869.

³ On Snowden, Delany, *Condition*, 135, wrote: "Isaac Humphrey Snowden, a promising young gentleman of talents, is now reading Medicine under Dr. Clarke of Boston, and attended the session of the Medical School of Harvard University, of 1850–51." "Clarke" must be Henry G. Clark, who is recorded in *The Boston Directory* for 1849, as a physician located at 67 Salem St. According to "Trouble among the Medical Students of Harvard University," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 43, no. 20 (18 December 1850): 406, Snowden's father was "the late Rev. Mr. Snowden, a colored preacher of much eminence for many years." See below for Snowden's subsequent effort to gain admission to the Harvard Medical School. Sterling, *Making of an Afro-American*, 133, notes that Snowden finished his medical studies at Dartmouth and that in 1854 he and Laing, "with . . . good medical libraries and a good supply of surgical instruments" embarked for Liberia.

⁴ On Delany (1812–1885), see Rayford W. Logan, ed., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 245–47; Dorothy Sterling, *Making of an Afro-American*; W. Montague Cobb, "Martin Robison Delany," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 44 (1952): 232–38; Curtis W. Ellison and E. W. Metcalf, Jr., *William Wells Brown and Martin R. Delany: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1978). Amalie M. Kass also recounts briefly Delany's life in "Dr. Thomas Hodgkin, Dr. Martin Delany and the 'Return to Africa,'" *Medical History* 27 (1983): 373–93, and (with Edward H. Kass), in "Martin Delany, Thomas Hodgkin, and the Black Nationalist Movement," *New England Journal of Medicine* 305 (1981): 682–84. One of the most important African American leaders of the nineteenth century, by 1850 he had already had a distinguished career, particularly as a founder and editor of major newspapers.

⁵ On Harriot K. Hunt, see Alice Felt Tyler, "Harriot Kezia Hunt (Nov. 9, 1805–Jan. 2, 1875)," *Notable American Women*, eds. Edward T. James, Janet W. James, and Paul S. Boyer (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 2:235–37. For further information, see Beecher and Altschule, *Medicine at Harvard*, 461, as well as the file of Harvard Medical School Papers on Admission of Women 1847–1850, 1866–1868, 1878, at the Countway Library Archives.

Figure 2. The Harvard Medical School, about 1850. (Courtesy of the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School)

The first document of the events in the fall of 1850 is a letter from Charles Brooks (1795–1872), a distinguished clergyman.⁶ In his letter to Holmes on 22 October 1850, Brooks emphasized Laing's need to be able to attend "gratuitously."⁷

To the Medical Faculty of Harvard University.

Gentlemen,

Mr. David Lang [for Laing], a young man of colour, has a great desire to receive medical instruction at your courses of lectures this winter, in order to fit himself for medical practice in Liberia (Africa) to which place he will go as soon as he can be prepared. He is without any means to pay for his instruction; & his friends are very anxious to have him attend the lectures; I have accordingly spoken to some members of him, & hope you will allow him to attend the several courses gratuitously. His character is unstained, his habits of study good & his talents most promising. He can furnish testimonials if you wish.

With respect, Gentlemen

I am yrs most truly,

Chas. Brooks.

Boston Oct. 22^d. '50.

Within a week and a half of the letter from Brooks, the Medical School received a formal communication in the third person, signed by a committee of two of the American Colonization Society. This letter proposed the admission of two African Americans.

To the Medical Faculty of Harvard College,

Gentlemen,

The Manager's [*sic*] of the Massachusetts Colonization Society respectfully request admission to the approaching courses of lectures in your Institution, for Daniel Laing Jr and Isaac H. Snowden, two young men of color, pursuing Medical Studies under our direction, for the purpose of practicing in Republic of Liberia in Africa, where their services are greatly needed. Application is made to your Institution rather than any other, not only on account of its distinguished advantages, but because, being residents here, they can attend much more conveniently and economically.

⁶ This was not the first time Brooks had asked that students be admitted without having to pay fees. In 1847, he wrote to President Edward Everett to request information about expenses for three students from Otsego County, N. Y., whom he had persuaded to enter Harvard. On behalf of one, he asked for "a small gratuity." Also in the fall of 1850, on 26 November, he wrote to President Sparks on behalf of "a young mulatto man, named Chapman, in Boston." When no answer was received, Brooks renewed the request on 24 January 1851. Sparks replied on 28 January:

Your letter of the 24th instant came duly to hand. There is no provision for beneficiary students in the Scientific School. On the contrary, the salary of each professor depends in part on the number of students in each department. The government of the College have no authority, therefore, to require the professors to take students without charge. I suppose each professor may instruct students gratis if he thinks proper. But you will perceive that the case is different from that of tending a course of lectures. Every student receives direct instruction daily, and for the most part several times a day, thus making constant claims upon the professor's

time. I am not aware of any objection on the grounds of difference of color.

But the subject must be left entirely to the professors. I shall send your letter to Professor Eustis, and request him to answer it.

But you must recollect, that, unless Chapman is well grounded in the preliminary studies, mathematics, the elements of the physical sciences, and drawing, he would make but small progress in six months towards the attainments requisite for an engineer.

It is much to be regretted that there is no beneficiary fund for students in the Scientific School, but the institution is yet in its infancy, and it is to be hoped that this want may be supplied at a future day.

The letters from 1850 and 1851 are in Presidents' Papers, vol. 3 (UA I.15.844) in the University Archives. That of 1847 is in UA I.5.130, Corporation Papers, v. 5.

⁷ This letter and the other documents, unless otherwise noted, are in the Frances A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School. The letter from Brooks is in the file "Petitions re: attendance of colored students, 1850–53."

We will therefore be obliged to you to inform us whether they can be admitted, and on what terms.

Abm. R. Thompson } Committee⁸
Joseph Tracy }

Colonization Office, Boston, Nov. 1. 1850.

The very next day the whole faculty met. The members were Walter Channing, 1808, professor of obstetrics and medical jurisprudence; John W. Webster, 1811, professor of chemistry; Jacob Bigelow, 1806, professor of materia medica and clinical medicine (and also an Overseer); John Ware, 1813, professor of the theory and practice of physic; John B. S. Jackson, 1825, professor of pathological anatomy; Henry J. Bigelow, 1837, professor of surgery; and Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1829, dean and professor of anatomy and physiology. The faculty met at Dr. Bigelow's, presumably the elder Bigelow. The letter from the Colonization Society was important in the decision that the faculty made, as the text of the minutes of 2 November shows: "A letter from a committee of the Colonization Society making some inquiries in behalf of two young men of color, with another letter from Mr. C. Brooks recommending one of these young men for gratuitous was laid before the Faculty, but not finally acted upon."

Two days later, on 4 November, the faculty voted to accept the two men as students, with Laing not being required to pay. Actual votes were taken. For the "gratuitous reception" of Laing, the affirmative vote was taken by Channing, Ware, Jackson, and Holmes. Negative were Bigelow, Sr., and Bigelow, Jr. Horsford was absent from the meeting. For the admission of Snowden "on the usual terms", affirmative were Channing, Ware, Jackson, and Holmes. Only Bigelow, Jr., cast a negative vote.⁹ The expression "usual terms" presumably means that Snowden was to pay tuition.

In the same month, Martin Delany applied directly to Oliver Wendell Holmes. Yet, Harvard was not the first choice for Delany; he had already tried several other institutions and been turned down.¹⁰

About the middle of the month, on 12 November, Harriot Hunt submitted a letter seeking admission.¹¹ Her application posed different concerns for the faculty than did those raised regarding the African Americans. They could be admitted without violating existing regulations or past precedent. African American males

⁸ Joseph Tracy (1794–1874) attended meetings of the Board of Directors of the American Colonization Society from 1844 to 1871. In 1858, he became a Life Director. See *Fifty-eighth Annual Report of the American Colonization Society, with the Minutes of the Annual Meeting and of the Board of Directors, January 19 and 20, 1875* (Washington, D.C., 1875), 6–7. Abraham Rand Thompson (1781–1866) received an honorary M.D. from Harvard in 1826; see the *Quinquennial Catalogue of the Officers and Graduates, 1636–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), 1159.

⁹ The faculty minutes are taken from the Medical Faculty Minutes, vol. 2, 1847–1867.

¹⁰ Dorothy Sterling, *Making of an Afro-American*, 122–35, discusses Delany's efforts to enter various medical schools: Jefferson and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Geneva, where Elizabeth Blackwell had just graduated;

and the Albany Medical College. Then Delany, with a letter from the Pittsburgh merchant John Cook to the head of the Berkshire Medical College in Pittsfield, applied in person. Berkshire had already accepted three African Americans intending to go to Liberia to practice medicine, but since he did not plan to leave the country, Dean Childs at Pittsfield turned him down. He did, however, refer him to Holmes at Harvard. For a discussion of Delany's visit to Liberia, see Amalie M. Kass and Edward H. Kass, *Perfecting the World: The Life and Times of Dr. Thomas Hodgkin 1798–1866* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 476–78, 480–83, 607, 609.

¹¹ For Harriot K. Hunt's letter of 12 November 1850, see the University Archives, College Papers, 2nd ser. (UA I.5.131.10), 17:373.

had studied at Harvard, but no woman had. The response of the faculty was the following vote on 23 November: "Voted that Miss Hunt be admitted to the Lectures on the usual terms, provided that her admission be not deemed inconsistent with the Statutes." Holmes wrote on 25 November to President Jared Sparks. In that letter,¹² he showed that other elements besides consistency with the statutes were at work, for along with transmitting the vote of the medical faculty he wrote:

The question is thus referred to the President and Fellows. By turning to their Records for August 14th and Dec. 27th, 1847, it will be seen what action was formerly had on a request from the same person.

Since that period one or more females have attended Medical Lectures at respectable schools in this country, and one, Miss Elizabeth Blackwell, has received the degree of Doctor of Medicine. A school has been founded in Boston to be devoted to the medical education of females, and the general opinion has perhaps somewhat changed with reference to the propriety of their engaging in practice.

Under these circumstances the request, and the vote passed respecting it are again submitted to the President and Fellows.

President Sparks replied on 2 December:

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter, I transmit a vote of the Corporation, which will explain itself. It was thought doubtful, at least, whether by the Statutes a *Degree* can be conferred on a female. That question is therefore reserved.

The actual vote of the Corporation read:

Voted—That this Board, if the Medical Faculty deem it expedient, perceive no objection arising from the Statutes of the Medical School to admitting female students to their Lectures, expressing hereby no opinion as to the claims of such Students to a Medical degree.

Student protest erupted, and the class held a meeting on the morning of Tuesday, 10 December 1850. Although the "departures from established rule gave offence to a portion of the members" of the class, the meeting "showed a majority for sustaining the faculty in the course of admitting whom they pleased to their lectures." The meeting was adjourned to the afternoon, but many students, not expecting there would be proposals against the African American students and the white woman, did not attend. At that meeting, two resolutions were passed by a majority of the students present.¹³ One (on the admission of Harriot K. Hunt), as noted in a preamble to the two resolutions, was passed with "scarcely a dissenting vote:"

Sirs,

At an adjourned meeting of the medical students holden on the afternoon of the 10th inst. to act upon the report of the committee appointed at a meeting

¹² The letter from Holmes to Sparks is in *College Papers*, 2nd ser., 17:378.

¹³ A clear account of the sequence of events on 10 December is given in "Trouble among the Medical Students of Harvard University." The author of the news item was sympathetic to the African American students: "We regret exceedingly this little disturbance, and the course adopted by the class. We cannot but think that if they had any real grievances, it would have been better to have approached the faculty in some other way. It may be considered an innovation to admit colored men into our colleges; but when it is remembered for what purpose these were admitted, there really cannot be so much

objection after all." He went on to report the faculty action taken on 13 December, i.e., continuation of the students, but did not in the following issue indicate that the faculty had subsequently backed down. The author of the news item was not, however, sympathetic to the admission of women: "But as to the propriety of admitting females to medical college in common with males, it is a matter in which there is a great diversity of opinion. We should most decidedly object to the adoption of the practice, preferring to have all females who wish to become disciples of the healing art, or otherwise assume the masculine professions, attend separate institutions for their education."

holden on the morning of the 10th inst, the accompanying Preambels [*sic*] & Resolutions were passed.

The first series, was passed, with scarcely a dissenting voice.

The second series, was passed, by a very large majority; there being present about sixty of the class.

In accordance with the vote of the class, these resolutions are herewith presented for your consideration.

The second petition, directed against the African Americans, despite an initial effort at presenting the case in terms of the effect the African Americans would have on the institution's mission and image, could not ultimately sustain the moderate tone:

SECOND SERIES OF RESOLUTIONS

Whereas blacks have been admitted to the lectures of medical department of Harvard Uni.'ty;
therefore,

Resolved That we deem the admission of blacks to the medical Lectures highly detrimental to the interests, and welfare, of the Institution of which we are members, calculated alike to lower its reputation in this and other parts of the country, to lessen the value of a diploma from it, and to diminish the number of its students.

Resolved That we cannot consent to be identified as fellow-students, with blacks; whose company we would not keep in the streets, and whose society as associates we would not tolerate in our houses.

Resolved That we feel our grievances to be but the beginning of an evil, which, if not checked will increase, and that the number of respectable *white* students will, in future, be in an inverse ratio to that of *blacks*.

★★

Resolved That we earnestly request the medical Faculty of the University to listen to this our remonstrance against the presence of such persons, and spare us the necessity of being in such company, or of compelling us to complete our medical studies elsewhere.

Resolved That a copy of these resolutions be presented to the medical Faculty.

E.P. Abbe. (Secretary)

★★ *Resolved* That we have no objection to the education and elevation of blacks, but do decidedly remonstrate against their presence in College with us.

All of the students were not opposed to the continuation of Laing, Snowden, and Delany. Twenty-six explicitly expressed "their dissent from the resolutions . . . in regard to the colored students attending the lectures" and pointed to precedent to support their case, that "once before the question had been decided," when an American of African descent previously attended Harvard. Although they wished that "no question had occurred for the agitation of this question," they felt it "a far greater evil" if admission should be refused. The cover letter enclosing the petition read:

Boston
12th December 1850

Sir,

We have the honor to enclose a protest from several members of the Medical class, against certain resolutions, relative to the presence of colored persons among us, which were passed at a meeting of Students on Tuesday the 10th Inst: and to request, that you will have the kindness, at your convenience, to lay it before the Medical Faculty of Harvard University for their consideration.

It will be observed that the Protest is in two parts. In the one are the reasons for the course adopted as embodied by the dissentients; while those who signed the other, not entirely concurring in those allegations, have restricted themselves to a simple expression of disapprobation of the Resolutions alluded to.

We would also remark that although we do not wish to assert, that the meeting was unfairly called or conducted, yet the number of those who have signed the enclosed Protest is much greater than the majority who voted for the Resolutions.

We have the honor to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servants,
Richard Gundry Chairman
Adam Wiley Secretary

The first of the petitions referred to, dated 11 December, was signed by Gundry and Wiley and twenty-four other students:

The undersigned members of the Medical Class desire to express their dissent from the resolutions adopted by the class in regard to the colored students attending the Lectures, and their entire acquiescence in the course which the Medical Faculty have seen fit to adopt in relation to these individuals.

Their prejudices would perhaps lead them to wish that no occasion had occurred for the agitation of this question; but, as students of science, above all, as candidates for the profession of medicine, they would feel it a far greater evil, if, in the present state of public feeling, a medical college in Boston could refuse to this unfortunate class any privileges of education, which it is in the power of the profession to bestow.

They remember, too, that, once before in the history of the college, this question has been decided; that a black was here received and educated more than twelve years since; that this action of our own college has been repeatedly sanctioned by the example of other medical colleges in New England: and they are deeply grieved, that at a moment like the present, any portion of their fellow-students should wish to change a policy dictated alike by considerations of humanity and public right.

Entertaining these views, they desire to express their most earnest protest against the resolutions upon this subject which have been adopted by the class.

The second statement of the students reacting to the protest read simply: "The undersigned not fully agreeing in the foregoing do from motives of their own protest against the proceedings of yesterday therein alluded to." Twenty-two signatures are appended.

On 12 December the faculty deliberated on the petitions, summarized them in their minutes, and referred "the second series of Resolutions and the 'Protest' . . . to Drs. Bigelow and Holmes as a Committee, to report at an adjourned meeting."

The next day the faculty met, with all present but Channing. They accepted the report "presented by Dr. Bigelow, from the Committee appointed at the last meeting," which meant that they adhered to their decision to allow the African American students to continue. The minutes read:

At a meeting of the Medical Faculty of Harvard University holden Dec. 13th 1850, the following communications were received.

A Remonstrance of the medical class against the proposed attendance of a female student, on the lectures of the College

A Remonstrance of a part of the class against the admission of colored persons to attendance on the lectures

A protest of another portion of the class in opposition to the last mentioned remonstrance;

Whereupon it was voted—

That the faculty are at all times anxious to promote the gratification and welfare of the members of the medical class as far as their own duty and the great interests of medical education permit.

Voted—That the female student who had applied for liberty to attend the lectures, having by advice of the Faculty, withdrawn her petition, no farther action on this subject is necessary.

Voted—That whereas arrangements were made in the beginning of the course, with gentlemen representing the American Colonization Society, for the attendance this year of certain colored persons, destined for Liberia, and whereas all persons who have purchased tickets, have thereby acquired rights, of which they cannot properly be divested,—therefore the Faculty do not feel themselves authorized to revoke their arrangements, or to recede from their former vote on this subject.

Voted that the Dean be requested to communicate these proceedings to the Medical Class.

The story continues to unfold. On 26 December the faculty met at the residence of Dean Holmes and voted, though not unanimously, against the students continuing after the present course.¹⁴ The minutes read:

The subject of the reception of colored students was taken up and discussed at considerable length, after which it was Voted that the Dean be requested to direct the following Vote and a letter to the agents of the American Colonization Society.

At a meeting of the Faculty held Dec. 26th 1850 it was voted

That the Dean be instructed respectfully to inform the gentlemen acting as agents for the Colonization Society, that this Faculty deem it inexpedient, after the present course, to admit colored students to attendance on the medical lectures.

The votes on the question of accepting and transmitting the above Resolution, were *Affirmative*, Drs Bigelow, Jackson, Holmes and Bigelow, Jr. *Negative*, Drs Channing and Ware. Dr Horsford being excused from voting.

In the Archives of the Medical School are two undated documents that appear to be drafts of letters written to inform the agents of the Colonization Society of the decision taken on 26 December vote. They may reveal some of the lengthy discussion that preceded the votes:

The Med. Fac. of H. C. have complied with the expressed wishes of Messrs. - - & - - agents of the Massachusetts Colonization Society by admitting two colored persons under their patronage to the present course of Lectures. While ~~they are~~ the Faculty are desirous of doing ~~their full share~~ ^{justice} towards ^{to} educating the claims of all who apply to them for medical education, they feel bound to remember that all causes of irritation introduced among their students interfere at once with the success of their teaching and their means of being useful to those who require their assistance. The presence of colored persons at the Medical Lectures had proved a source of irritation and distraction during the present session

Overleaf: Undated drafts of two letters from Harvard Medical School faculty to the agents of the Colonization Society. It is not known which letter was eventually sent to the Society. (Courtesy of the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School)

¹⁴ Squeezed in at the foot of the page preceding the minutes of 26 December, almost as if Channing wished that a permanent record be made of his attempt to keep the question open, is an addendum to the minutes: "The following resolution was offered at the meeting of Dec. 26th by Dr Channing: 'Moved, that the question of admitting

colored students to the Medical Lectures be referred to the President and Fellows of the University for final decisions.'" Channing's was the sole affirmative vote. Both Bigelows, Jackson, and Holmes voted against the resolution. Ware and Horsford are recorded as "not voting."

The Med. Fac. of H. C. have complied with the expressed wishes of Mess. --- & --- agents of the Massachusetts Colonization Society, by admitting two colored persons under their patronage to the present course of Lectures. While ^{the Faculty are} they are desirous of doing ~~their~~ full ^{duties} ~~share~~ towards ~~supporting~~ the claims of all who apply to them for medical education, they feel bound to remember that all causes of irritation introduced among their students interfere at once with their success of their teaching and their means of being useful to those who require their assistance. The presence of colored persons at the Medical Lectures has proved a source of irritation and distraction during the present session more general and serious than ^{ought} ~~could~~ have been apprehended. It becomes the duty of the Faculty therefore, to request the gentlemen who represent the Colonization Society not to renew an application which is cordially incompatible with the welfare of the school unless their change to grant.

Notes that the Dean be directed requested to direct a letter to the Colonization Society containing the following Note.

To Abraham R Thompson } Essays

Gentlemen

In conformity to your request contained in your letter of Nov the Medical Faculty of Harvard University voted to furnish tickets of admittance to certain colored students introduced by you, as destined for the settlement at Liberia.

The result of this experiment has satisfied them that the ^{the, white and black} intermingling of different races, on a footing of equality & personal proximity ~~at in their lecture rooms~~ ~~the~~ ~~course~~ of lectures, is distasteful to a large portion of the class, & injurious to the interests of the school. — ^{therefore} ^{held}

At a meeting of the Faculty, Dec 26, 1850 it was voted

That the Dean be instructed to respectfully to inform the gentlemen acting as agents for the Colonization Society, that this Faculty deem it inexpedient, after the present course, to admit colored students to attendance on the medical lectures.

more general and serious than ~~could~~ [^] might have been apprehended. It becomes the duty of the Faculty therefore, to request the gentlemen who represent the Colonization Society not to renew an application which it is evidently [*sic*] incompatible with the welfare of the School under their charge to grant.

[unsigned and undated]

The other draft is actually addressed by name to one of the agents of the American Colonization Society. Clear differences exist in tone between the two drafts, and it is not known which one was actually sent.

To Abraham R. Thompson } Esqrs
Gentlemen

In conformity to your request contained in your letter of Nov the Medical Faculty of Harvard University voted to furnish tickets of admission to certain colored students introduced by you, as destined for the settlement at Liberia.

The result of this experiment has satisfied them that the intermixing of [^] the white and black ~~different~~ races ~~on a footing of equality & personal proximity during this course of lectures~~ [^] at in their lecture rooms, is distasteful to a large portion of the class, & injurious to the interests of the school. — therefore

At a meeting of the Faculty [^] held Dec 26, 1850 it was voted

That the Dean be instructed respectfully to inform the gentlemen acting as agents for the Colonization Society, that this Faculty deem it inexpedient, after the present course, to admit colored students to attendance on the medical lectures.

However, the letters show only the part of the discussion that the faculty wished to make public, and they also do not reveal what led to the meeting that reconsidered the earlier vote. Despite their terseness, the minutes of the 3 January 1851 meeting may provide a clue. They note that “A paper was presented signed by fifteen members of the Class requesting to be informed whether colored persons are to be admitted as students at another course of Lectures.” The Dean was asked merely to communicate the vote of 26 December to the signers.

A “paper” with fifteen signatures reads:

To the Medical Faculty of Harvard University;
Gentlemen,

The undersigned, members of the medical class, would respectfully submit to the Medical Faculty their desire to be informed whether colored persons are to be admitted as students at another course of lectures. This request is offered not with the view of influencing any action of the Faculty but simply that the undersigned may have opportunity to make such arrangements for the future as shall be most agreeable to their feelings in the event of negroes being allowed again to become members of the school.

Since the income of the faculty related directly to the fees of students, the faculty were put in a difficult position by the suggestion that some students might make other “arrangements for the future.” Whether the stimulus to reconsideration was as described, the faculty did, indeed, reverse their position; and, three years later they held to it.

Three years following the dispute over the entrance of Laing, Snowden, and Delany, on 5 November 1983, the Colonization Society again proposed the admission of Isaac H. Snowden. As earlier, Snowden still intended to practice in Liberia. The letter from the Society also made explicit that he would not attend

for an extended period. Since he was already engaged in the study of medicine, he was planning to leave in the spring. This time Snowden approached the student body for support, and in a letter of 15 November seventy-five students stated that they had no objection to his attendance:

To the Medical Faculty of Harvard College:
Gentlemen:

Mr. Isaac H. Snowden, a colored man now engaged in the study of medicine, for the purpose of practicing in Liberia, Africa has informed us that he wishes to leave this country for that place in the ensuing spring; and that in order to do so, it is very necessary that he should receive the benefit of the present course of Lectures.

Believing his object to be a worthy one, we beg to present that we have no objection to his attendance upon this course of Lectures and respectfully ask that you will grant him permission to do so.¹⁵

Eight students did object. Their letter to the faculty is as follows:

To the faculty of Harvard Medical College—,
As a movement has of late arisen in this institution for the purpose of admitting a negro as a student of Harvard Medical college— & as a paper to that effect has been signed by some of its members, & presented to the faculty, some effort is necessary on the part of those opposed, to prevent this inexpedient action. We therefore students of Harvard Med Col placing all confidence in the judgment of our preceptors; would respectfully request of them that they would decide the matter unbiased by the opinions of others—

Snowden was denied admission at the meeting of 16 November 1853. The minutes record the decision:

Mr. Isaac H. Snowden, a colored student, presented to the Faculty, a petition that he might be allowed to attend the present course of Lectures; accompanied by a petition to the same effect signed by seventy-five of the medical class, & a remonstrance against the same signed by eight of the class;—all of which are on file.

Against this petition the Vote of Dec. 26th. 1850 was urged as a sufficient answer. Mr. S., however, had been allowed by a Vote of the Faculty (Nov. 4th 1850) to attend the course of 1850-1; & it was suggested that the Faculty were in some degree bound to him.

The subject was fully discussed, & ~~Mr. Snowden's petition was rejected~~ it was Voted not to rescind the Vote of Dec. 26th 1850.

As time lessened the salience of the protests of the fall of 1850, aided perhaps by changes in attitudes brought about by the Civil War, a small number of African Americans began to attend the Harvard Medical School. In 1869, Edwin Clarence Joseph Turpin Howard was awarded the M.D., and in 1871 James Still received his medical degree from the Harvard Medical School.¹⁶

¹⁵ The letter was dated 15 November 1853. The incident is discussed in Beecher and Altschule, *Medicine at Harvard*, 477–78.

¹⁶ On African Americans and Harvard, see Emory J. West, "Harvard and the Black Man, 1636–1850: The First Stages of Struggle," *Harvard Bulletin*, 22 November 1971: 21–26; and Werner Sollors, *Varieties of Black Experience at Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). On African Americans in medicine, see especially, W. Montagu Cobb, "The Black

American in Medicine," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 73 (Supplement, 1981): 1185–1244; L. W. Johnson, "History of the Education of Negro Physicians," *Journal of Medical Education* 42 (1967): 439–46; Herbert M. Morais, *The History of the Negro in Medicine* (New York, 1967); Dietrich C. Reitzes, *Negroes and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958); and Vivian O. Sammons, *Blacks in Science and Medicine* (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Co., 1990).