

## The Charles R. Drew Papers: Biographical Information

*“ . . . So much of our energy is spent in overcoming the constricting environment in which we live that little energy is left for creating new ideas or things. Whenever, however, one breaks out of this rather high-walled prison of the "Negro problem" by virtue of some worthwhile contribution, not only is he himself allowed more freedom, but part of the wall crumbles. And so it should be the aim of every student in science to knock down at least one or two bricks of that wall by virtue of his own accomplishment.”*

--Charles R. Drew to Mrs. J. F. Bates, a Fort Worth, Texas schoolteacher, January 27, 1947

Charles Richard Drew, the African American surgeon and researcher who organized America's first large-scale blood bank and trained a generation of black physicians at Howard University, was born in Washington, DC, on June 3, 1904. His father, Richard, was a carpet layer and financial secretary of the Carpet, Linoleum, and Soft-Tile Layers Union--and its only non-white member. His mother, Nora Burrell Drew, was a graduate of the Miner Normal School, though she never worked as a school teacher. Charles and his younger siblings, Joseph, Elsie, and Nora, grew up in the largely middle-class and interracial neighborhood of Foggy Bottom (a third sister, Eva, was born after the family moved to Arlington, Virginia, in 1920.) Their upbringing emphasized academic education and church membership, as well as civic knowledge and personal competence, responsibility, and independence. At the age of twelve, Charlie (as he was called, even as an adult) became a paper boy, selling several Washington papers from a street corner stand; within a year, he had six other boys working for him and covering a wider area. As he got older, his after-school and summer jobs included supervising at city playgrounds, lifeguarding at the local swimming pool, and working construction jobs.

Washington was still racially segregated during that era, but its large African American community included many prosperous and well-educated families, and their public schools were often excellent. Drew attended Stevens Elementary and then Dunbar High School, which was then one of the best college preparatory schools--for blacks or whites--in the country. Though bright, he was not an outstanding student; instead, he devoted much of his effort to athletics, where he excelled. Ambitious and competitive, he lettered in four sports, and won the James E. Walker Medal for all-

round athletic performance in both his junior and senior years. He was voted "best athlete," "most popular student," and "student who has done the most for the school." He also served as captain of Company B in the Third Regiment of the High School Cadet Corps during his senior year. Drew did not express any early medical ambitions; his senior yearbook entry noted that he aspired to become an electrical engineer.

Drew graduated from Dunbar in 1922 and went to Amherst College in Massachusetts on an athletic scholarship. His achievements on the Amherst track and football teams were legendary; long after he distinguished himself as a blood banking pioneer and medical educator, many still remembered him best as an athlete. As in high school, Drew did not excel scholastically. He did, however, develop an interest in the medical sciences through his biology courses with Otto Glaser. Later, he would also cite the death of his oldest sister, Elsie (from tuberculosis complicated by influenza), in 1920, and his own hospitalization for a college football injury as events that fostered his interest in medicine. Drew received his AB from Amherst in 1926. To earn money for medical school, he took a job as athletic director and instructor of biology and chemistry at Morgan College (now Morgan State University), in Baltimore. During his two years at Morgan, his coaching transformed its mediocre sports teams into serious collegiate competitors.

The racial segregation of the pre-Civil Rights era constrained Drew's options for medical training. Some prominent medical schools, such as Harvard, accepted a few non-white students each year, but most African Americans aspiring to medical careers trained at black institutions such as the Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, DC, or Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Drew applied to Howard, but was not accepted because he lacked enough credits in English from Amherst. Harvard accepted him, but wanted to defer his admission to the following year. Not wanting to wait, Drew applied to the McGill University Faculty of Medicine in Montréal, which had a reputation for better treatment of minorities.

McGill University allowed its graduate and professional students to play on school teams, and Drew once again became a star athlete. But he also became a star student, winning several important prizes and fellowships, and graduating second in a class of 137, in 1933. During his internship and surgical residency at Montréal General Hospital, 1933-1935, he worked closely with bacteriology professor John Beattie, who was

exploring ways to treat shock with transfusion and other fluid replacement. This work fostered an interest in transfusion medicine that Drew would later pursue in his blood bank research. Drew hoped to extend his training with a surgical residency in the United States, preferably at the Mayo Clinic, but major American medical centers rarely took on African American residents, partly because many white patients in that era would refuse to be treated by black physicians. In 1935, he joined the faculty at Howard University College of Medicine, starting as a pathology instructor, and then progressing to surgical instructor and to chief surgical resident at Freedmen's Hospital.

Howard's College of Medicine was upgrading its programs with help from the Rockefeller Foundation's General Education Board. This effort included appointing well-qualified white department chairs to set up and run residency programs and train black successors, along with fellowships for further training of junior faculty. Drew trained with Department of Surgery chair Edward Lee Howes for three years and then got a fellowship to train with eminent surgeon Allen O. Whipple at New York's Presbyterian Hospital, while earning a doctorate in medical science from Columbia University. At Presbyterian, he worked with John Scudder on studies relating to treating shock, fluid balance, blood chemistry and preservation, and transfusion. His main project with Scudder--and the basis for his dissertation--was an experimental blood bank at Presbyterian, opened in August 1939. In June 1940, Drew received his doctorate in medical science from Columbia, becoming the first African American to earn the degree there.

While attending a conference in April 1939, Drew met Minnie Lenore Robbins, a professor of home economics at Spelman College in Atlanta. They married in September of that year, and had three daughters and a son. (The eldest daughter, Bebe, born in 1940, was named for the blood bank--BB--project her father was immersed in at the time.)

With his fellowship completed, Drew returned to Howard University to take up duties as assistant professor of surgery. He was called back to New York in September 1940 to direct the Blood for Britain project. Great Britain, then under attack by Germany, was in desperate need of blood and plasma to treat military and civilian casualties. In August, Presbyterian and five other New York hospitals had begun a collaborative effort to collect and ship plasma (the fluid, non-cellular portion of blood)

to Britain. Although others had developed the basic methods for plasma use, Drew, as medical director, instituted uniform procedures and standards for collecting blood and processing blood plasma at the participating hospitals. When the program ended in January 1941, Drew was appointed assistant director of a pilot program for a national blood banking system, jointly sponsored by the National Research Council and the American Red Cross. Among his innovations were mobile blood donation stations, later called "bloodmobiles." Ironically, as the blood bank effort expanded in preparation for America's entry into the war, the armed forces initially stipulated that the Red Cross exclude African Americans from donating; thus Drew, a leading expert in blood banking, was ineligible to participate in the program he helped establish. The policy was soon modified to accept blood donations from blacks, but required that these be segregated. Throughout the war, Drew criticized these policies as unscientific and insulting to African Americans.

While working on the Blood for Britain project, Drew also passed his American Board of Surgery exams, receiving certification early in 1941. He returned to Howard University and in October became chair of the Department of Surgery and Chief of Surgery at Freedmen's Hospital. He also became the first African American to be appointed an examiner for the American Board of Surgery. For the next nine years he devoted himself to training and mentoring his medical students and surgical residents, and raising standards in black medical education. He also campaigned against the exclusion of black physicians from local medical societies, medical specialty organizations, and the American Medical Association.

Drew's innovative work was recognized by awards and honors including the 1942 E. S. Jones Award for Research in Medical Science from the John A. Andrew Clinic in Tuskegee, AL; an appointment to the American-Soviet Committee on Science in 1943; the 1944 Spingarn Medal from the NAACP, for his work on blood and plasma; honorary doctorates from Virginia State College (1945) and Amherst College (1947); and election to the International College of Surgeons in 1946.

Drew died on April 1, 1950, in Burlington, North Carolina, from injuries sustained in a car accident while en route to a conference. Despite the prompt and competent care he received from the white physicians at a nearby hospital, he was too badly injured to survive. Drew's tragic death generated a persistent myth that he died because

he was denied admission to the white hospital, or was denied a transfusion, but such stories have been debunked repeatedly. Though he died prematurely, Drew left a substantial legacy, embodied in his blood bank work and especially in the graduates of the Howard University College of Medicine.