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Katherine Carson Dandridge: AANA's Hidden Figure

First Female African American Anesthetist Identified

Katherine Carson Dandridge, RN, is the first known African American woman to become a nurse anesthetist, according to records from Meharry Medical College (MMC), a historically black medical college in Nashville, Tenn. MMC is the largest repository of historical, medical research and advancements for African Americans in the dental and medical health sciences and careers. After 60 years of existence, The MMC School of Nursing closed in 1960.

A May 1941 MMC Commencement program lists Dandridge as a graduate receiving a certificate in anesthesia. Also, a record of Dandridge being an anesthetist can be confirmed in the American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology (AANA) Database.

According to the Saturday, April 19, 1941, edition of the *Phoenix Index Newspaper* based in Arizona, Dr. Edward L. Turner, MMC's 1941 President declared, "If Miss Dandridge isn't the first negro woman anesthetist in all medical history, she is certainly the first we've ever heard of, or that can be discovered anywhere in America."

Dr. Turner added, "The most remarkable thing about Miss Dandridge's forthcoming graduation, is the extent of the training she has received. Top-ranking white medical schools train their anesthetists not more than nine months. Meharry's course is one full year of study and training." A similar article was published in *The Crisis Newspaper* based in Nashville.

Dandridge was born November 23, 1909, in Youngstown, Ohio, eventually moving to Newcastle, Pa., where she graduated from high school. In 1936, she began her nursing education at MMC's School of Nursing and graduated from MMC's four-year program with her registered nurse license in May 1940. Online newspaper archives indicate that Katherine Carson married Paul Dandridge when she was 21 years of age. Dandridge died in October 1992 at age 82.

Although Dandridge was the first in 1941, two other African American women earned anesthesia certificates, although MMC did not hold a graduation in 1942 due to World War II. Pauline Marable received her anesthesia certificate, and Bernice Lucille Rogers-Scruggs received certificates in both Xray and anesthesia. The AANA Database contains a record of Rogers-Scruggs, but no further information can be found on Marable. These three women are the only nurse anesthesia certificate graduates in the history of MMC.

Meharry Medical College Requests AANA Membership on Behalf of African American Anesthetists

Information from the AANA archives sparked the research that led to the discovery of Katherine Carson Dandridge, the first African American woman anesthetist. Here is an account of the internal AANA discussion of record and actions that took place surrounding extending membership privileges to anesthetists of color.

According to the November 1942 *AANA NewsBulletin*, at the request of Meharry Medical College Officials in Nashville, Tenn., the AANA Board of Trustees during a business session referred to the

membership question of “admitting colored nurse anesthetists who have completed a course in anesthesia into the AANA.”

Active discussion followed. In view of the fact that opportunity had not been afforded for sufficient study of this subject by the state associations, it was voted unanimously that this question be referred to a special committee to make a report to the Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees was instructed to prepare recommendations for submission to the general membership at the annual meeting in 1943. It was voted to “allow the colored anesthetists to attend all scientific meetings of the association in the interim, and Meharry Medical College be so notified.”

After various delays and referrals of the issue for further study, the committee that passed on the credentials for membership in the Minnesota affiliate and the national committee, of which Lucy Richards was chairman, took the initiative in 1944 and approved the application of two qualified nurse anesthetists of color on the grounds that the bylaws governing membership had no qualifying statements regarding race.

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