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THEBOOK

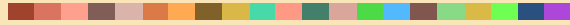
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Three years after publishing *The Future Emerges from the Past: Celebrating 200 Years of Alabama African American History and Culture*, alafricanamerican.com continues to honor and highlight past, present, and future Alabama African American history makers.

BEYOND THEBOOK

Because Alabama African American history can't be taught in a single month, we will continue to share short articles along with links to videos, photos, reference material, and additional information for all to enjoy on a monthly basis. The website's goal is the same as the book's: To inspire the young and young at heart to dream big and celebrate Alabama's rich African American history and culture.

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THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF

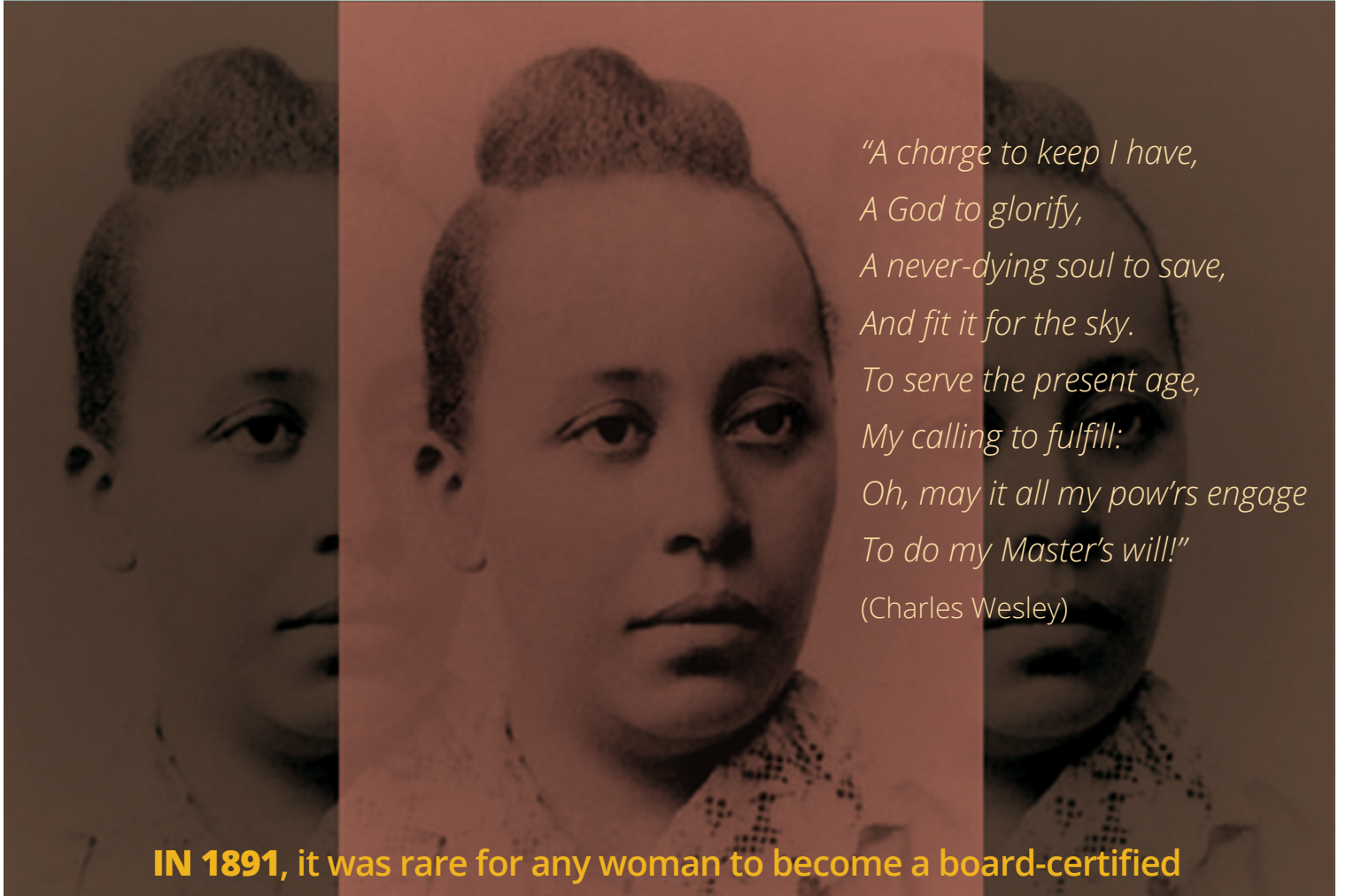


Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson



THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF **Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson**

by Dr. Martha V. Bouyer



*"A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.
To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
Oh, may it all my pow'rs engage
To do my Master's will!"*
(Charles Wesley)

IN 1891, it was rare for any woman to become a board-certified physician, but when **Halle Tanner Dillon** passed the Alabama State Medical Examination, even the *New York Times* took notice. While some southern newspapers had scoffed at the idea of a Black woman even applying to take the exam, the *Times* noted that Johnson passed this "unusually severe" 10-day written exam to become "**not only the first colored female physician, but the first woman of any race**" to officially practice medicine in Alabama."



The Tanner family.

Dr. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson was the eldest of nine children born to **Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner** and **Mrs. Sara Elizabeth Miller Tanner**. Dr. Dillon Johnson was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 17, 1864. The family later moved to Philadelphia where her father served as Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. He also published the *Christian Review* which was a publication for members of the church.

Dr. Johnson came from a very distinguished family. Her brother was the world-renowned painter, **Henry Ossawa Tanner**. Her niece was **Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander** the first black woman in the United States to receive a Ph.D. and the first president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.



From left: Benjamin Tanner; Henry Ossawa Tanner; Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander.

At the age of 22, Dr. Johnson married **Charles Dillon** in 1886. The couple moved to Trenton, New Jersey. To this union, a daughter, Sadie was born. In 1888, Charles died from complications of pneumonia and Halle moved back to Philadelphia to live with her parents and siblings. After moving back home, she decided to return to school and pursue a degree in general medicine at the **Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania**. Dr. Johnson was the only Black in her class and graduated in 1891, with honors.

At the time of her graduation, **Dr. Booker T. Washington** was looking for someone to serve as a medical doctor for **Tuskegee Institute** in Alabama. The doctor would not only serve the 450 students enrolled at the school but the faculty and the community. He had written a letter to the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in hopes of getting someone to fill the position. This was wonderful opportunity for any aspiring young doctor, but for Dr. Dillon Johnson it was an answer to a call of service on her life. The position offered a very modest salary, room and board, and an opportunity to change lives for Black people living in Macon County, Alabama. Dr. Dillon answered the call and moved to Tuskegee.



1891 Graduating Class of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. Dr. Johnson top row, circled on the right.

From the moment she said yes, the challenge was on. Although she had a degree in general medicine, she still had to pass the Alabama medical exam, which was said to be one of the most stringent in nation. She started out with what appeared to be two strikes against her, she was a woman and Black. Up until this time, no woman had passed the Alabama exam. She began this process by submitting her application to the board of examiners on August 17, 1891, and started the exam soon after.

Dr. Dillon was not on her own. Dr. Washington had convinced **Dr. Cornelius N. Dorsette**, a friend from Hampton Institute, to come to Montgomery several years earlier and set up a medical practice. Dr. Dorsette is thought to be the first licensed/certified Black doctor in Alabama. He served as a trustee of Tuskegee and as Dr. Washington's personal physician. He served as Dillon's mentor and tutor and along with other Black doctors, helped her prepare for the exam.

APPLICATION FOR EXAMINATION.

To the Board of Medical Examiners of the State of Alabama -- County:

Desiring to practice the _____ system of
Medicine in the County of _____ ALABAMA, I have the honor herewith
to make application to your board for the examination required by the law of the
State; and as preliminary thereto, I herewith declare that I have not been exam-
ined by any Board of Medical Examiners in the State of Alabama within the last
twelve months; and also respectfully submit the following statement of facts:

(1.) Name in full *Walter James Dillon*

(2.) Place and date of birth *Pittsburgh Pa. Oct. 17th 1864.*

(3.) Place of present residence *Luverge, Ala.*

(4.) College and date of graduation *Hornum's Medical College
of Pennsylvania, May 6th 1891*

(5.) Place and length of time of previous practice *Philadelphia
Penn.*

(6.) References *Dr. S. C. Armstrong,
Clara Marshall M.D. Ala. Rank 11/1891.*

(7.) Date of application *August 17th 1891*

Signature, *H. J. Dillon*



Far left: Dr. Tanner Dillon's application to the Alabama board of medical examiners.
Right: Dr. Cornelius N. Dorsette

The preparation had to be intense because the exam would be nothing short of grueling. The exam took place over 10 days and was administered by the top doctors from across the state. She was examined on 10 subjects by 10 different examiners. At that time, anyone wanting to take the state medical certification exam could either take it before any county board or at the state board in Montgomery. Dr. Dillon decided to take the exam in Montgomery. Among her examiners were some of the most prominent physicians in Alabama at the time.

Dr. Peter Bryce, one of her examiners, was superintendent of the **Alabama Insane Asylum**. Today, the hospital bears his name for the contributions Dr. Bryce made to treating people with mental issues. Dr. Bryce tested Dr. Dillon on medical jurisprudence. **Jerome Cochran**, state health officer and the primary force behind the **Medical Licensure Act of 1877**, examined Dr. Dillon in chemistry. Her examiner in natural history and diagnosis of diseases was **George A. Ketchum**, Dean of the Medical College of Alabama from 1885 until his death in 1906. Dr. Ketchum was also involved in creating the **Medical Association of the State of Alabama (MASA)** in 1847. **James T. Searcy**, her examiner in hygiene,



became superintendent of the Alabama Insane Hospital following Bryce's death. Dillon was examined in obstetrical operations by **John. B. Gaston**, who had served as president of MASA in 1882.

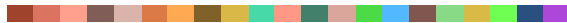
Dr. Dillon passed the examinations. Early in the process, **Walter Bressell**, clerk of the Alabama State Board of Health, told her that she had done well in chemistry. That information bolstered her confidence. She told Dr. Washington in a letter during the exams that she felt she could pass if graded fairly and acknowledged that the surgery portion was very difficult. She so impressed the members of the board that her performance on the examination was noted in the 1892 MASA journal *Transactions*.

The examination took several formats that included oral questions followed by written responses from Dr. Dillon. In order to pass, Dr. Dillon needed a score of 75%. She passed the exam with a score of 78.81%, 3.81% higher than the required score.

When Dr. Dillon first came to work at Tuskegee, her father, **Bishop Benjamin Tanner** came with her and stayed with her for a year in Alabama serving as a church lecturer. Dr. Dillon served as the doctor for the Institute's students, staff members and their families, and the community. She would also establish a pharmacy where she compounded medicine for her patients, taught two classes each semester on anatomy and hygiene, and established a nursing school.

Dr. Dillon served in these roles from 1891 to 1894. She married a fellow member of the faculty, **Reverend John Quincy Johnson** in 1894.

The Johnson's would leave Tuskegee for Columbia, South Carolina where Rev. Johnson became president of Allen University. As Rev. Johnson pursued his education, the family moved to several cities including Hartford, Connecticut; Atlanta, Georgia; and Princeton,



Nursing students at Tuskegee Institute, c. 1890s.

New Jersey. The couple had three sons, **John Quincy Jr.**, who was named after his father; **Benjamin T.**, named after her father; and **Henry Tanner**, named after her brother, the artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner.

In 1900, the family settled in Nashville, Tennessee, where Rev. Johnson served as pastor of the Saint James AME Church. On April 26, 1901, Dr. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson died of dysentery during childbirth.



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Hine, Darlene. *Black Women in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Washington, Booker T. "Training Colored Nurses at Tuskegee." *American Journal of Nursing* 11 (October 1910): 167-71.