



Dr. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson

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## A Ground-Breaking Woman Doctor

Victoria McAfee

Halle Tanner wanted what seemed an impossible goal for an African-American woman in the late 1800s—she wanted to study medicine and become a doctor. In spite of the tremendous odds against her, she became the first female physician to pass the Alabama state medical examination and the first woman physician at Tuskegee Institute.

Halle was born into a family deeply rooted in the Christian faith. Her father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was born of free parents and became a college-educated African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop. He wrote extensively, publishing books and articles on issues pertaining to people of color, and he became the editor of the influential *Christian Recorder* weekly newspaper and the *AME Church Review*. In his writings, he spoke about his faith, the struggles with the AME church, and his disappointments when Christians chose to act less than Christlike. Through it all, he maintained a habit of morning and evening devotions with his wife, Sarah Elizabeth Miller Tanner, and their seven children.

We know he prayed a blessing over his first child, Henry O. Tanner, at his birth, so he surely prayed the same way over each of his other children, including Halle, who was born October 17, 1864.

The Tanner home constantly welcomed clergy of all races. The children observed and heard spiritual and intellectual conversations throughout their growing years. It caused them to believe anything was achievable, and they set high standards for themselves. Henry, the oldest son, became a famous painter, and another son, Carlton Tanner, became a minister in his mother's church.

Halle became a partner with her father on the *Christian Recorder*, but it's reported her mind strayed from her writing because she fell in love with Charles E. Dillon. The two married in 1886, and a year later moved to New Jersey, where Halle and Charles became parents of a daughter, Sadie. But tragedy struck and at the young age of 23, Halle became a widow.

Halle moved back into her family home and after a few months of grieving she decided to enter medical school. She attended the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, completed a three-year course, and graduated with high honors in a class of 36 women on May 7, 1891. This single mother was ready for her medical career.

Shortly before her graduation, Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute, had written to the college looking for a resident physician for the Institute. He had been searching four years for the right person. Some white

doctors had helped at the school and generally been cordial to the all-black student body, but Washington felt "the growing need of broadening out its work and putting this responsible charge in the hands of one of the members of the race, if one could be found capable and venturesome enough to stand the rigorous examination which the State of Alabama gives to all applicants who desire to practice medicine within its border."

Halle Dillon sought the job, which paid \$600 a year with room and board. She would have to teach two classes at the Institute, compound her own medicines, and run the school's health department. Washington came to Philadelphia, met with Halle and her father, and determined that "Tuskegee would be the right place for a young black doctor to begin her career."

But first, Halle would have to pass the rigorous Alabama medical board test, a 10-day-long exam on 10 different medical subjects. The mere fact that she was taking the exam caught both local and national attention—a black woman in Alabama at that time daring to take such a test for state certification was big news. Her father wrote to Washington, "We are all anxious about the Doctor. Not that we have any misgivings as to her ability to pass any reasonable and just examination. But we know that both her sex and her color will be against her."

Halle passed the test with a 78% average, a score that she decided was due to a very "rigorous" grading of her papers. But her passing was again headline news, especially since a white woman had previously failed the test and still been certified by the state board.

Once at Tuskegee, Halle worked as a physician, pharmacist, and teacher and also ran a private practice for three years. She founded a training school for nurses and staff and a medicine dispensary.

Halle's work at Tuskegee ended in 1894, when she met and married Rev. John Quincy Johnson, an AME minister who had come to teach math at Tuskegee. Her husband then became president of Allen University, a private black college in Columbia, South Carolina, for a year before the couple moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1900. Johnson became pastor at Saint Paul AME Church for three years, and Halle became a pastor's wife, raising the couple's three sons, who were named after her husband, her father, and her painter brother. The expected birth of another child brought great joy to the household, but also great tragedy. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson died April 26, 1901, at age 37 of childbirth complications due to dysentery.

Sadly, little has been written about Halle's faith and personal life in spite of her pioneering accomplishments. But coming from a strong Christian family, working at a Christian institution such as Tuskegee, and then marrying a husband who was a pastor—no doubt she was a woman of great faith who credited God for allowing her to overcome such difficult challenges and achieve so much in so little time.



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