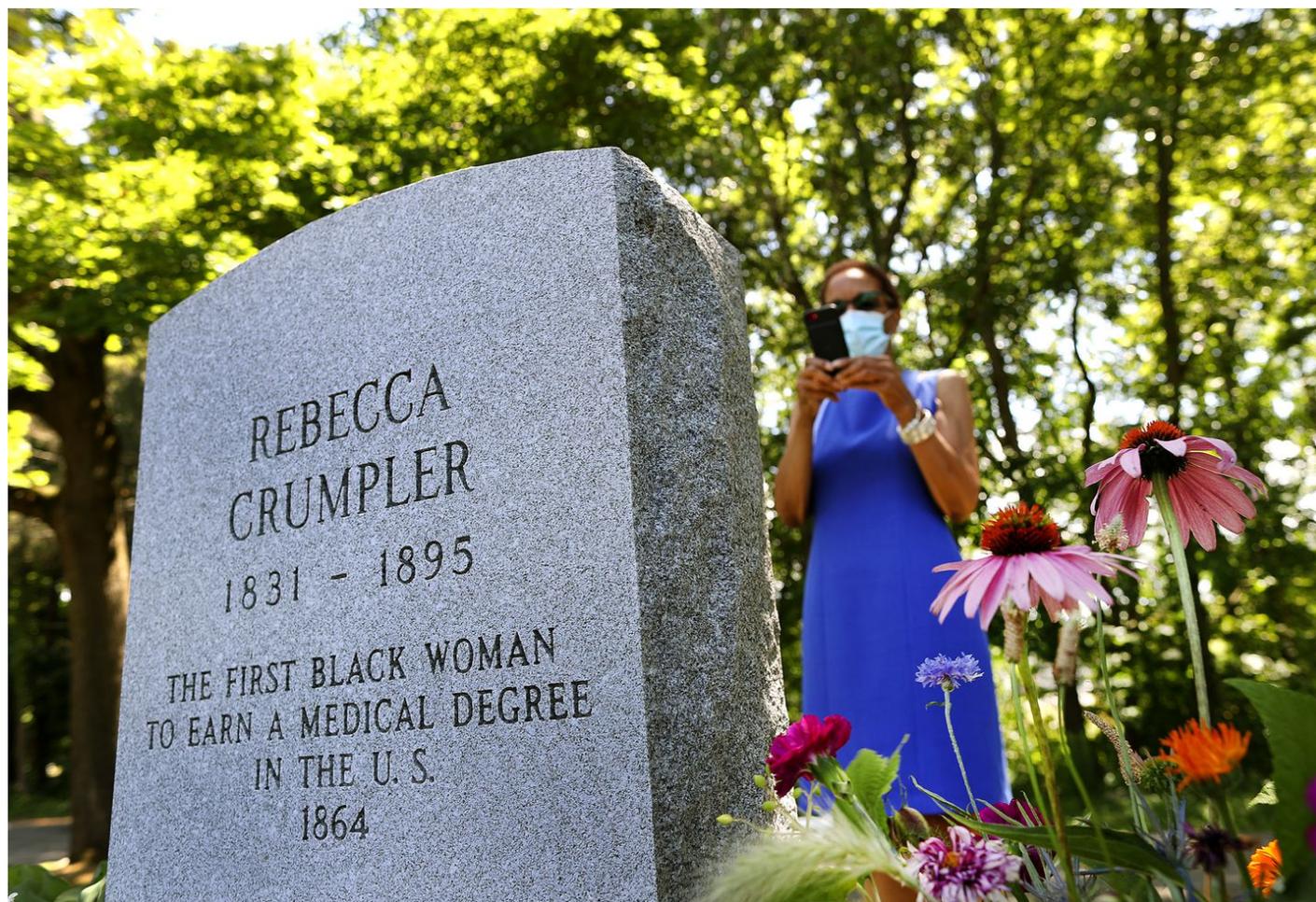


Gravestone dedicated to the first Black female medical doctor in the US

By **Brian MacQuarrie** Globe Staff, Updated July 17, 2020, 7:37 p.m.



A gravestone dedication ceremony was held at Fairview Cemetery for Rebecca Crumpler, the first Black woman to become a medical doctor in the United States. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Rebecca and Arthur Crumpler lay side by side in unmarked graves in Hyde Park for more than a century, a wife and husband buried 15 years apart at the fringes of Fairview Cemetery near their home on Mother Brook.

No headstones carried their names. No plaque told of their lives and accomplishments. Nothing but the records of the city-owned cemetery could direct the curious — if any came along — to an unadorned patch of tree-shaded grass that covered their remains

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Until now.

Dedicated at a poignant ceremony Thursday, new granite tombstones use a few chiseled words to commemorate a remarkable story that has rarely been told. Here lies Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first Black female physician in the United States, and her husband, a former escaped slave who much later became the oldest pupil in the Boston schools.

The path to this recognition was an unlikely journey of serendipity and persistence. But 125 years after Dr. Rebecca Crumpler's death, the legacy of a pioneer physician who earned her medical degree in Boston, treated freed slaves in the South, and returned to Boston to care for the marginalized carries powerful, contemporary resonance.

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“She navigated a threshold and wall that continues to challenge us,” said Dr. Joan Reede, the Harvard Medical School dean of diversity and community partnership, at the service. “Dr. Crumpler was a dreamer who showed a fortitude and belief in self, a belief that she could and should make a difference in the world.”

That dream took flight when Crumpler was accepted at the dawn of the Civil War to the New England Female Medical College, a bold decision by a groundbreaking institution that later became part of the Boston University School of Medicine.

Raised by an aunt in Pennsylvania, Crumpler had worked for eight years as a nurse in Charlestown, earning plaudits from physicians who recommended she be admitted to the college. In 1864, she earned a medical degree as the school's first and only Black graduate.

The following year she married Arthur Crumpler, a man who had escaped from slavery in Virginia and made his way to Boston in 1862 after shoeing horses for the Union Army. Dr. Crumpler's first husband, Wyatt Lee, died of tuberculosis in 1863.

She cared for those who needed help the most, primarily poor women and children, regardless of their ability to pay. That mission took her immediately after the war to Richmond, where she tended to recently freed Blacks whom white physicians would not treat.

In addition, her prescriptions would not be filled by white pharmacists, yet another example of unrelenting racism and sexism that Crumpler endured in the former capital of the Confederacy, said Dr. Melody McCloud, a Black physician at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta who has researched her legacy.

"She had a physician's dedication, even to journey to war-torn Virginia to give aid and medical care to people whom the white doctors would not touch," said McCloud, a graduate of BU medical school. "It was often said that the MD behind her name stood for 'mule driver.'"

Crumpler decided to return to Boston, where in 1869 she began practicing at her Beacon Hill home on Joy Street, where a plaque has been placed in her honor.

Around 1880, Rebecca and Arthur moved to Hyde Park, then a separate town with a small, strong Black community. It was there, near the couple's newly marked graves, where Dr. Crumpler in 1883 wrote "A Book of Medical Discourses," the country's first medical publication by a Black female physician.

"I early conceived a liking for and sought every opportunity to be in a position to relieve the sufferings of others," Crumpler wrote.

She also offered this thought: "A cheerful home with a small tract of land in the country with wholesome food and water is worth more to preserve health and life than a house in a crowded city with luxuries and 20 rooms."

Crumpler died at age 64 in 1895 of fibroid tumors. Her husband, who worked downtown as a porter, attended evening school in Boston into his late 60s and died in 1910.

"I sit down and practice my writing lessons and write my own letters," he told the Globe, which described him as "Boston's oldest pupil" in the 1898 article. "And then I sit down and add up, subtract, multiply, and divide my figures all by myself."

McCloud had not known of Dr. Crumpler while she attended BU medical school, but learned about her after moving to Atlanta and encountering the Rebecca Lee Society, a medical organization of Black women that had been named for Crumpler.

In 2016, McCloud cofounded a permanent exhibit at the BU School of Medicine that honors Crumpler, and last year she encouraged Governor Ralph Northam of Virginia to declare a Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler Day.

"There are a lot of accomplishments of Blacks that are left out of mainstream history books," McCloud said. "But now is a new day and time across our country, and Dr. Rebecca Lee's story is being brought forward not only by the BU School of Medicine, but by the efforts of the graveside service."

McCloud did not know where Crumpler was buried until she received a call last year from Vicky Gall, a history buff and president of the Friends of the Hyde Park Library.

Gall, who enjoys walking through cemeteries, was intrigued by a reference to Crumpler while browsing through a [Wikipedia entry](#) on noted Hyde Park residents.

“I had no idea who she was,” Gall said.

One question led to another, and Gall discovered that the Crumpler graves were unmarked for reasons that remain unknown. A fund-raising appeal began this year, and donations for the tombstones arrived from 21 states, including \$1,300 from a recruiting class at the Boston Police Academy.

“I just felt that something needed to be done,” Gall said. “You can’t leave this behind and say somebody else will do it.”

The effort attracted support from local residents such as Tom Sullivan, vice president of the Hyde Park Historical Society.

“No one that I ever mentioned her to at the Historical Society had ever heard of her,” Sullivan said. “This has definitely tied me more closely to the history of the town, just to become aware of the Black community that existed here.”

Reede, the Harvard Medical School dean, said the Crumplers’ story holds special significance for her, the first Black female dean at the medical school, as well as a pediatrician and the descendant of slaves. It’s a story, she added, that can be instructive and inspirational for Black female medical students of today.

“You don’t have to be the first,” Reede said. “There’s a path that’s already there.”



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