



Dr. William S. Lynn, Jr.



A solitary act in the Bell Building

Striking a blow for racial desegregation at a Southern medical school

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The battle for civil rights for African Americans in the United States was waged on multiple fronts that included acts of active and passive resistance, violence, and litigation related to the desegregation of public schools, parks, public transportation, colleges and universities, hotels, restaurants, and the workplace. Less well known is the story of the desegregation of hospitals, medical societies, and medical schools.^{1,2,3}

In 1961 the trustees of Duke University approved the admission of qualified candidates, regardless of race, to graduate and professional programs.⁴ Other seminal events in the desegregation of Duke Medical School include a failed attempt to desegregate the medical wards in 1956, the matriculation in 1963 of the first African American medical student, the desegregation of the clinics and patient units of Duke Hospital in 1963 and 1964, and the subsequent appointment of the first African American physician to the medical school faculty.^{3,4,5} A previously unrecognized but notable act of desegregation was the result of the defiant behavior of a single faculty member, with the subtle collusion of his faculty colleagues.

William A. Perlzweig, the founding chairman of Duke's Department of Biochemistry, served from 1930 to 1949.⁶ One of the members of Perlzweig's department was Philip Handler (1917–1981), who ultimately succeeded Perlzweig as department chairman in 1950. Handler's faculty recruits included Samson

Gross from the Rockefeller University, a member of both the biochemistry and microbiology departments hired in 1959, Norman Kirscher, and Irwin Fridovich, a researcher on chemical free radicals, who arrived in the early 1950s.^{2,5} Perlzweig, Handler, Gross, Kirschner, and Fridovich also all happened to be Jewish—a fact that would prove to be of importance in the events to be described.

The biochemistry laboratories were located in the Bell Building, named in honor of American Cyanamid president William Brown Bell, and located a few hundred yards from the front door of Duke Hospital.^{7,8,9} At the time, the bathrooms in the Bell Building were identified by signs as being for “Whites Only Men,” “Whites Only Women,” “Colored Men,” and “Colored Women.”^{5,10}

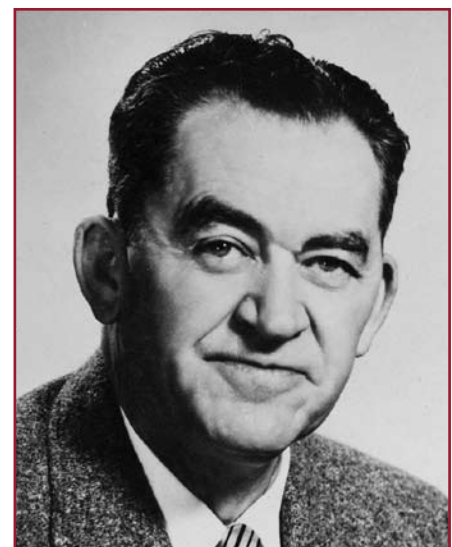
Among the early important scientific efforts at Duke was a collaboration with Lederle Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company owned by American Cyanamid. James B. Duke had gained financial control of Cyanamid during World War I and, by 1930, three of the company’s officers were also trustees of the Duke Endowment.¹¹ The collaboration centered on the work of Dr. Joseph W. Beard (1902–1983), who was hired in 1937 as an assistant professor of Experimental Surgery at Duke. Born in Athens, Louisiana, Joseph Beard, constantly in disputes with his family and classmates, went off to make his way in the world at seventeen years of age. After three years of work as a laborer, clearing rights-of-way for roads and railroads around Shreveport, Louisiana, and without a high school diploma, he talked his way into Centenary College in Shreveport, excelled academically, and eventually received a BS from the University of Chicago. He attended medical school and was a surgical

resident at Vanderbilt University.¹² After leaving Vanderbilt in the early 1930s, Beard worked in the New York and Princeton laboratories of the Rockefeller Institute under two of the nation’s leading authorities on viruses and cancer, Richard Shope and Nobel Laureate Francis Peyton Rous. Beard was recommended for the Duke job by his friend Alfred Blalock, chairman of Surgery at Johns Hopkins. Lederle funded Beard’s laboratory at Duke, and within a few months of his arrival Beard had created a profitable vaccine for the prevention of equine encephalomyelitis for the company.⁶ In 1939 rumors circulated that Beard was being considered for a Nobel Prize.¹²

Lederle began paying Beard royalties and, in 1941, gave him an electron microscope, one of the nation’s first. The royalties helped pay for construction of the Bell Building for medical and veterinary research.¹¹ Since it was financed in part by Beard’s research, and housed his virology laboratories, the Bell Building was referred to by the Duke faculty as Joe’s building. The chairman of Medicine, Eugene Stead, Jr., wrote:

Beard ran his building with an iron hand. Every room had to have steam. There was no other way to insure sterility. No equipment was allowed in the corridors. If you didn’t use your space, it was quickly assigned to others.¹³

Beard maintained collaborations with the Rockefeller Foundation and the United States military on infectious disease. Later in his career he turned his attention to molecular biology and, at eighty years of age, was still actively engaged in work on reverse transcriptase.¹² Generations of Duke medical students were trained by Beard in surgical techniques using anesthetized



Dr. Joseph W. Beard.

dogs. Beard was considered “by all students to be unrelenting in perfection and uncompromising in discipline.”^{12p305}

One of the non-Jewish members of the biochemistry faculty was William S. Lynn, Jr. Born in Clarendon, Virginia, in 1922, Lynn was educated at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now called Auburn University), graduating in 1943. He received his MD degree from Columbia University in 1946. Lynn completed a medical internship and junior residency at Duke before a final year of residency at the Raybrook State Hospital in New York. He then spent two years as a National Science Foundation fellow in biochemistry at the University of Pennsylvania. Lynn joined the Duke faculty, eventually rising to professor of Medicine in the Division of Allergy—Pulmonary Medicine, and associate professor of Biochemistry. His research focused on the environmental impact of pollutants, lipid metabolism, and mitochondrial function.⁹

Lynn is described by his faculty colleagues as “the sweetest man in the world,” a “gentleman,” “sensitive to discrimination,” and “someone who had no use for segregation although he was born a Southerner.”^{5,7,8,9} An African American laboratory technician said Lynn would “say anything that came to his mind. He was straight up.”¹⁰ In Lynn’s own words, he said that growing up in Alabama he “liked black folk better than white folk.”⁹ Lynn noticed that the African American female laboratory workers who cleaned his glassware had fewer “places to go to the bathroom because Joe Beard had [some of] the bathroom doors in the Bell Building painted ‘Whites Only.’” Lynn recalled, “I put my mind to solve the problem. I was a chemist and knew what would dissolve anything.”⁹ After midnight one night in 1959 Lynn took some solvent and washed the words “Whites Only” off of the bathroom doors.

The next day an enraged Beard demanded to know who was the guilty party. Beard was generally viewed as an austere and forbidding man. He once told a student, “Familiarity is never desirable with superiors because it is dangerous; with inferiors, because it is unbecoming; least of all with the common herd, who become insolent from sheer folly; they mistake favor shown them for the repeated need felt for them. Familiarity trenches on vulgarity.”^{12p307} Beard did not approve of the large number of Jewish faculty, particularly northern Jews, occupying laboratories in a building he had helped pay for. Beard’s views were typical of the time. Jews faced barriers in medical school admissions, obtaining residency training positions, and faculty appointments.^{14–18} Because Handler was a “Jewish boy from New Jersey, Beard hated him more than black folk. He presumed the culprit was one of those northern Jews, not a southerner” and certainly not a Christian like Lynn.⁹ None of the biochemistry faculty would identify the perpetrator and Beard had the words “Whites Only” repainted.

The cat-and-mouse game was repeated many times. Lynn would wash off “Whites Only” and Beard would seek the perpetrator, to no avail. One night in 1961, Lynn appeared at the laboratory of Dr. Fridovich, borrowed a bottle of solvent from

him, and proceeded to wipe the words “Whites Only” off of the bathroom doors again. (Lynn had used up his own supply of solvent.) The next day, an irate Beard confronted Fridovich. “You did this,” said Beard. Fridovich denied doing it but did not say who was responsible. Beard ordered the words repainted again. Lynn once more appeared in Fridovich’s laboratory, retrieved the bottle of solvent, and once again washed the words off the bathroom doors. An enraged Beard confronted Fridovich again. Fridovich told Dr. Beard that if he didn’t like the situation, he should speak to Handler.⁷

Beard and Handler were well matched opponents. Both were scientists of great stature with powerful personalities.^{6,11} Handler, born in New York City, graduated from the City College of New York with majors in biology and chemistry. He received his PhD from the University of Illinois and began his career at Duke as a postdoctoral fellow. His research career focused on the biosynthesis and degradation of nicotinic acid, human pellagra, and the related disease of dogs, blacktongue. Handler helped determine the steps leading to nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NAD) synthesis from nicotinic acid and ATP, and showed that the degradation of NAD yields nicotinamide and adenosine diphosphoribose. These pathways, now called the Handler-Preiss cycle, helped elucidate one of the major principles of biochemistry: that major metabolic pathways are essentially irreversible and that the interconversion of two metabolites usually proceeds by different metabolic pathways. Handler was known as a liberal political activist who considered medical research an extension of the medical school’s social mission.¹ In 1969 Handler was elected president of the National Academy of Sciences. During his twelve years in office he became a major spokesman for science. Handler was awarded the Medal of Science by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.^{11,19}

The same African American laboratory technician who knew Lynn described Beard as someone who “didn’t like blacks . . . he had a bad attitude . . . he wouldn’t speak to black people, he looked over you.”¹⁰ In contrast, Handler was described as a “perfect man, mild mannered, a gentleman, he gave all respect.”¹⁰ There are no surviving witnesses to the meeting between Handler and Beard and we do not know what words were exchanged. While Handler knew that Lynn was the instigator, we know that he didn’t turn him over to Beard. Because Handler did not want to jeopardize the biochemistry department’s laboratory space, he sought a peaceful resolution of the dispute, but did not order Lynn to desist.¹⁰

Lynn continued to remove the words “Whites Only” as fast as Beard had them repainted. Eventually, Beard gave up the fight. The removal of the marks of segregation on the bathrooms was accomplished. Thus, the Bell Building was the first facility to be irreversibly desegregated at the institution. The African American female laboratory workers finally had an additional bathroom.

In the next few years, desegregation occurred on multiple fronts at Duke. The first African American medical student



The Bell Building.

matriculated at the school and received his MD degree in 1967. In 1963, following court cases directing the desegregation of hospitals, Duke integrated its medical and surgical wards and, more slowly, its medical staff.^{1,2,3} The separate cafeterias for black and white employees were merged.¹⁰

The civil rights battle was fought in large and small ways. One observer commented, “When you were discriminated against, you kept on going. But you never forgot.”¹⁰ William Lynn’s act and his colleague’s support were, undoubtedly, one of many tens of thousands of small acts of resistance and defiance. These multiple small acts, when combined, were part of the great Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s.

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