MEDICAL HISTORY

FRANÇOIS FOURNIER DE PESCAY: THE UNHERALDED PRECURSOR OF THE MODERN BLACK PHYSICIAN

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Occasionally, when researching important figures of the past, a person of considerable talent and importance is rediscovered—a person who, inexplicably, has been confined to the dim attic of history while far less significant figures have for ages basked in the sunlight of notoriety. One such person in the field of medicine is François Fournier de Pescay, who could easily qualify as the precursor of the modern black physician. This suggestion is hardly based on a cursory investigation of the careers of black physicians in the modern era. It is simply a fact that no other physician of African descent was able to accomplish as much during the 18th and 19th centuries, or probably any time prior to the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps it is because Fournier was born and nurtured in France that he has not been accorded the recognition he deserved for being the first medical doctor of African descent to help found a medical society, to publish medical research, to found a literary and scientific journal, and to become a distinguished administrator and educator at home and abroad. But one thing is certain: he would not have fared so well had he attempted to launch his career somewhere in the Americas.

Another factor limiting Fournier's renown probably has to do with the paucity of biographical material available in French and the complete absence of any original research on his life in English. There are only some brief biographies in English based on the equivalent of a one-page sketch found in *Biographie universelle*, still the single most important source for information on Fournier.* Of course, it is possible to locate bits of relevant facts here and there in sundry French publications, sometimes via serendipity, but until a well-supported scholarly investigation is undertaken, a number of crucial and intriguing details about Fournier's career, personal life, and family history will remain a mystery.

François Fournier de Pescay was born September 7, 1771, in Bordeaux, France, the son of parents who had owned a plantation in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) but chose to leave the then prosperous colony. It was obvious from the pigmentation of his skin that he had been born into a "family of color," and that what flowed through his veins was "le sang africain."** Of the members of his immediate family we know very little, but he memorialized his father's genius in an award-winning biography entitled *Notice biographie sur François de Pescay, cultivateur de Saint-Domingue.**** At the time of Fournier's birth there were probably no more than a thousand Negroes and mulattoes living in France as slaves, freedmen, or, as was likely the case with the

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*The painfully short sketch on Fournier by Louis Gabriel Michaud (cited hereafter as Michaud) in Biographie universelle (Paris: Desplaces, 1856, XIV, 556-557) has been rewritten and summarized numerous times by French authors, who have added very little or no new information about him. The three books in English are H. W. Debrunner's Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe (Basel, Switzerland: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 1979); Shelby T. McCloy's The Negro in France (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1961); and volume two of Joel A. Roger's World's Great Men of Color (New York: Helga M. Rogers, 1947).

**Among those sources that cite Fournier's African ancestry are Michaud, 556, and a sketch by St. Le Tourneur (cited hereafter as St. Le Tourneur) in Dictionnaire de biographie Française (Paris: Librarie Letouzey et Ane, 1976, XIV, 682).

***This biography of Fournier's father published in 1822 in Paris, and honored by the Société Royale d'Agriculture, apparently has not survived.

Fournier family, free ex-colonists in pursuit of a better life and the advantages the mother country had to offer. A census report in 1778 indicated that 174 Negroes and mulattoes resided in the city of Bordeaux, the majority of whom came from the French West Indies.†

Because the "noirs" and "mulâtres" in France were not burdened by the same body of oppressive laws enforced in the colonies restricting mobility and opportunities, the young Fournier received a fine education in Paris and then returned to Bordeaux to study medicine. Caught in the midst of the turbulent French Revolution, the patriotic Fournier entered military service on March 10, 1792, as a surgeon ("chirugien aide-major"), advancing to surgeon-major in September 1793, and later to "médecin ordinaire." In 1794 he was ordered to assist Nicolas Saucerotte, surgeon-in-chief of the Army of the North,†† and a year later he was made chief adjutant surgeon of the Army of the Sambre and Meuse.

He temporarily ended service in the military circa 1799 and settled in Brussels where he devoted himself to the study and practice of medicine. While in Brussels he was employed as professor of internal pathology at the city's secondary school of medicine. Dedicated to raising the standards of his profession, he co-founded the Medical Society of Brussels (Société de Médecine de Bruxelles) in 1801, serving as its first secretary-general and recording several volumes of its proceedings.††† Recognizing the need to revive the journal, *Esprit de journaux, français et étrangers,* a product of the Enlightenment that sought to convey both literary and scientific knowledge, which had ceased publication in 1774 due to the exigencies of war, Fournier founded *Le nouvel ésprit des journaux* in September 1803.

It was during his residence in Brussels that he began publishing his medical research. Earlier, in 1795, he had proved himself a superior scientist when he became the first Frenchman to successfully duplicate the experiments of the noted English physician, Adair Crawford, on the effects of barium chloride in the treatment of tuberculosis, which he later published in Strasbourg in 1805 as *Propositions médicales sur les scrofules, suivre de quelques observations sur les bons effets du muriate de baryte dans les affections scrofuleuses.* Also while in Belgium he published an eighty-six page tract on tetanus entitled *Du tétanus traumatique* (Brussels: Flon, 1803), which was praised by the Medical Society of Paris.‡ He tried to establish that the treatment of tetanus relies on the confirmation of, and strategy to relieve, muscle rigidity and spasms accompanying the disease. His *Essai historique et pratique sur l'inoculation de la vaccine* (Brussels, 1801) went through several editions. By 1803 Fournier had moved from Brussels to Strasbourg, France where he was "professeur-directeur" of l'École spéciale de médecine de Strasbourg.

Fournier reentered the military in 1806 as surgeon-major in the "gendarmes d'ordonnances." From Paris he was sent to Valençay in 1808 to serve as the personal physician of the Prince of Asturias, who had been confined to a sumptuous chateau by Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. He attended the Prince of Asturias until 1813 when the latter departed from France to ascend the throne of Spain as King Ferdinand VII. In appreciation for his devoted service, the Spanish monarch awarded Fournier, now aged 43, a pension. It appears that in the course of his six-year residence at Valençay his interests shifted somewhat from medical research to literature. While there he wrote *Encore un mot sur Conaxa, où les deux gendre, où lettre d'un habitant de Versailles* (Paris, 1811), possibly a translation of a poem in five cantos by Hugues de Xentrales from an 11th century manuscript in Old French, found in the library of the Benedictines of Avignon, entitled *Le vieux troubadour, où les amours* (Paris: Le Normant, 1812)‡‡; he also wrote *Les Étrennes, où*

†McCloy, 52.

††Alphonse Rabbe, et al, Biographie universelle et portative des contemporaines (Paris: F. G. Levault, 1834, IV, 620).

†††Joseph-Marie Querard, La France Littéraire (Paris: G-P. Maisonneuve, 1964, III, 186). According to Michaud, 556, it was during his residence in Brussels that Fournier founded a medical school ("il s'etablit à Bruxelles, où il fonda une école de médecine"). However, we have not been able to find another source to corroborate this claim. Michaud may have confused Fournier's having co-founded a medical society—which he failed to mention—with founding a medical school.

‡Rabbe, 621.

‡‡The author of the article on Fournier in Biographie des hommes vivants (Paris: L.. Michaud, 1817, III, 44) contends that although this poem was thought by some persons to be a translation by Fournier, it is actually a poem composed by the doctor himself.

entretiens des morts sur les nouveautes litteraires, sur l'Académie Française, le conservatoire de musique, le salon, les journaux et les spectacles (Paris: J. G. Dentu, 1813), under the pseudonym Francis Edmond; and *Prophèteties de Merlin l'Enchanteur* (no date), a recounting of the alleged prophecies of the mythical magician whose origin is traced back to the 5th century, based on the writings of the chronicler Turpin (or Tilpin) who died around the year 800.

Fournier was next appointed secretary to the Council of Health (Conseil de Santé) for the French armies. Apparently, his years of service during the Revolution and under Napoleon did not lower his esteem in the view of those who came to power with the return of the Bourbon monarchy in 1814. This is amply demonstrated by his continued service on the Council of Health until 1823 and King Louis XVIII having conferred upon him the Order of the Legion of Honor in 1816 in recognition of his distinguished medical career and service to the nation.

In this phase of his professional life, Fournier's scholarly interests reverted to scientific research, and he proved himself to be a competent biographer. He authored the 98-page *Nouveau projet de réorganisation de la médecine, de la chirurgie et de la pharmacie en France* (Paris: Mequignon-Marvis, 1817) of which the US Library of Congress has an autographed copy; a short dissertation on the uvula and articulation entitled *Du grasseyement* (Paris: C. L. F. Panckoucke, 1817); co-authored a work on fever with the renowned physician Phillipe Pinel, one of the founders of modern psychiatry, *Die gesammte Fieberlehre* (Pesth: Hartleben, 1820); a translation with his colleague, Louis-Jacques Begin, of a work on the diseases of the eye by the Italian physician Antonio Scarpa, *Traité des principales maladies des yeux* (Paris, 1821), in two volumes with notes and additions; edited the first 12 volumes of *Recueil de mémoires de médecine, de chirurgie et de pharmacie militaires* (Paris, 1815-1822)‡‡‡ sponsored by the Council of Health and published by the Ministry of War; and he published numerous articles on a variety of diseases such as dysentery, fever, and scabies in *Dictionnaire de sciences médicales* § (Paris: C. L. F. Panckoucke, 1816), *Annales des faits et sciences militaires* (Paris: C. L. F. Panckoucke, 1818), and other scientific collections.

Besides the award-winning biography of his father in 1822, Fournier's reputation in this field of writing is further enhanced by contributions to *Biographie universelle*. Biographical sketches in this important work authored by Fournier include those of the noted French physician and mathematician Antoine Fizes (1690-1765); Pierre-Joseph Desault (1744-1795), founder of the first school of clinical surgery in France; and the celebrated English physician, William Harvey (1578-1657), who discovered how blood circulates in the human body.

Two unexpected writings by Fournier stored in the Bibliothèque Nationale are *Lettre à Son Excellence M. le maréchal, duc de Raguse, sur le gymnase normal militaire et civil, dirigé par M. Amoros* (Paris: P. N. Rougeron) signed by Fournier on January 1, 1821§§; and *Discours pronounce aux obsèques de M. Moreau de Saint-Méry* (Paris: Mme. Huzard),§§§ a eulogy delivered by Fournier on January 30, 1819 at the funeral of Moreau de Saint-Méry, the revered politician, legal historian, and opponent of the system of slavery in the French West Indies as sanctioned by the "Code Noir."

Fournier's career took a rather surprising turn in 1823 when he sailed with his family to Haiti (probably his first voyage there) to assume the directorship of the newly founded l'Academie d'Haiti in Port-au-Prince. It has been speculated that his real motive for accepting the position had more to do with achieving some unspecified diplomatic objective than with promoting education on the island. At that time Haiti's treasury was empty and the black-ruled government was still negotiating with France for official recognition, which did not occur until 1825 when Pres-

‡‡‡This collection was formerly entitled Journal de médecine, de chirurgie et de pharmacie militaire. Its publication was interrupted by war. M. Biron was the original editor. He was succeeded by Fournier. See Louis-Jacques Begin, Études sur le service de santé militaire en France (Paris: J-B Baillière, 1849, 133) and Rabbe, 621.

§His article on fever ("Fièvre") in the Dictionnaire des sciences médicales, XV, 249-250, was most recently cited in Huldrych M. Koelbing, "Some Remarks on the History of Arterial Pathology," Pathologia et Microbiologia, 43, 1975, 87.

§§See Michaud, 556; and St. Le Tourneur, 863.

§§§St. Le Tourneur, 863.

ident Jean-Pierre Boyer promised to pay a large indemnity to the vanquished French planters. It has been further speculated that Fournier had some personal interests to protect, possibly owing to his parents' former residence there. In any event, he resigned his post at the l'Academie d'Haiti in 1825 after adding courses on medicine and law to the curriculum.|| According to at least one source, he became the government's inspector-general of health services before departing for France.||||

Fournier left Haiti having accomplished few of the political and personal goals he had hoped to achieve. He arrived in Paris in 1828 in very poor health and soon retired to the salutary climate of the South of France. His health must have improved markedly for he was able to take on another bureaucratic assignment, that of inspector of water for the small town of Barèges, located near the border with Spain in the French Pyrennes. Fournier did not publish any medical research or literary works in the last phase of his career as a civil servant. He is reported to have died in the year 1833 in the resort city of Pau, approximately 55 kilometers northwest of Barèges.

Concerning his immediate family, we know that after Fournier's death his four orphaned daughters—Dina, Maxime, Gabrielle, and Claire—requested, via the Préfet de la Gironde, passports to return to Haiti.||||| A son, Gustave-François, had died February 8, 1818, at the age of twenty, but not before establishing himself as a promising writer, having published *Éloge de Saint Jérôme* (Paris: Delaunay, 1817) and contributed articles to *Biographie universelle*.¶

A contemporary of Fournier was James Derham, who has been referred to as the father of black doctors in the United States. Born a slave in Philadelphia in 1757, he learned the practice of medicine under the tutelage of three masters who were physicians. His last master freed him in New Orleans where he built a successful practice and won the reputation as one of the most distinguished doctors in the state of Louisiana.¶¶ The first black surgeon to serve in the US military was Alexander T. Augusta, who treated soldiers during the Civil War; and the first medical journal founded by Afro-Americans was the short-lived *Medical and Surgical Observer* in 1892. But Fournier's career in France and Haiti eclipsed that of Derham in the US, who never published medical research, held public office, or enjoyed a national or international reputation. Fournier's service in the military predated that of Augusta by several decades, and he both founded a scientific and literary journal and authored numerous medical treatises long before a person of African ancestry in the Americas had published anything of a similar nature.

Living at a time when the evils of the "peculiar institution" were still extant, Fournier was extremely fortunate to have started out in such an advantageous situation, as contrasted to the common plight of other men of color then in the Western Hemisphere, for he had been born into a free family of some means, if not of wealth. His career was helped substantially by the fact that he did not suffer any significant discrimination in France, something he would certainly have encountered had he lived, say, in the US. This is not to disparage his drive, intellect, dedication, or other personal attributes, which were necessary for his success. These circumstances, however, must be put into proper perspective and taken into consideration when one ponders why Fournier had no real counterpart across the Atlantic.

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||Leonidas C. Lherisson. Les Écoles de Port-au-Prince. Port-au-Prince: H. Amblard, 1895, p 13.

||||Nouvelle biographie générale. Copenhagen, Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1965, XVII-XVIII, p 384.

|||||Amilcar Lamy. Le Lycée Alexandre Petion. Port-au-Prince: Impr de l'Etat, 1950, p 18.

¶While perusing the catalog of the Bibliothèque Nationale for monographs by Fournier's colleague, Louis-Jacques Begin, an entry was noticed for a Mme. Emile Begin, "née Fournier-Pescay," who translated into French Charles Robert Maturin's gothic horror classic Melmoth: The Wanderer. This 1821 translation is listed in the US Library of Congress National Union Catalog Pre- 1956 Imprints, and Mme. Emile Begin's full name is revealed to be Eugenia Fournier-Pescay Begin. Of what relation she may have been to François Fournier de Pescay, we have not been able to determine.

¶¶Herbert M. Morais. The History of the Negro in Medicine. New York: Publishers, 1967, pp 8-10.