

**Dr. Louis T. Wright (July 23, 1891 – October 8, 1952)**

Dr. Louis Tompkins Wright, the outstanding African American surgeon, leader and activist was born a slave, on July 23, 1981 in Georgia. Dr. Wright, although was born into slavery, came from a family of prominent people. His two grandfathers were white, with one being a Judge in Georgia. His father, Ceah K. Wright (1854-1895), had his formal education at Haven Normal School, continued on to Clark University, and later Meharry Medical College, one of the countries two black medical colleges. Ceah Wright was both a physician and minister. After years of practicing medicine, Ceah Wright entered ministry full time. It was in this capacity that he met his wife, Lula Tomkins. Lula was 17 and Ceah was 38 years when they got married. The couple had two kids. The first child died at the age of 10. The other, Louis Wright was born in 1981. After only three years of marriage, Ceah died of cancer leaving Lula to fend for the children. He died when Louis was 4 years old. To support her family, Lula taught sewing at Thayer home.

At age 8, his widowed mother Lula Tompkins Wright married Dr. William Fletcher Penn, an Atlanta physician. Dr. William Fletcher was the first African American to have graduated from Yale University Medical School. Louis' stepfather influenced the young boy tremendously, embracing him as his own son. Penn was the first Black in Atlanta to own an automobile, and he invited Louis to join him when he made house calls.

He attended Clark University, graduating as valedictorian with distinction in chemistry. Wright later enrolled in Harvard Medical School, from which he graduated fourth in his class in 1915. During his years in Harvard, Wright opposed any form of discrimination by firmly resisting the University’s efforts to setting up special arrangements for his clinical obstetrics. While still in Harvard, Wright started getting involved in activism after the movie, Birth of a Nation was opened in Boston. Together with Walter Cannon, Louis studied the effects of alcohol on gastric emptying and published a paper in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal in 1916. Despite his success with his research, Wright was rejected by Harvard, Peter Bent Brigham, and Boston City Hospital for a surgical residency. Louis later secured an internship from Freedman’s Hospital in Washington DC.

At age 25, young Wright, a recent graduate of Harvard Medical School, returned to Atlanta to practice medicine and founded with his stepfather and others, Atlanta's NAACP chapter, where Wright served as treasurer on the executive committee. His early experience with overt discrimination flamed his passion for equity and justice in all aspects of life, but particularly in the area of professional education and medical care. His leadership of Harlem Hospital enabled the institution to serve as a model for the racial integration of professional staffs and teaching programs; his leadership of the NAACP pushed the organization to the forefront in the fight for racial integration of health care. Eventually, at age 44 in 1935, Wright would serve as the first African American chairman of the NAACP Board of Directors, a voluntary position that he held until his death in 1952. To build support for an integrationist strategy, Wright, with other physicians, White and Black, from Harlem Hospital, founded the Manhattan Medical Society in 1930. Wright personally battled the Rosenwald Fund for much of his professional life in the NAACP, believing that any expansion of "separate but equal" policy, even through the Black hospital movement, only deepened the color line of segregation. Other things he tackled while on the board of NAACP were, strategies to eliminate lynching, improving jobs and education of black Americans through litigation

Wright married Corinne M. Cooke, a resident of New York City, in 1918, one month before leaving for France to fight in World War I. On his return after the war, he found employment in the venereal disease clinic in the New York City Health Department. He immediately applied for staff privileges at Harlem Hospital, and after 6 months of waiting he was offered an entry-level position working in the women's outpatient clinic. When Louis arrived on his first day, 4 physicians quit in protest, and O'Neal, who hired him, found himself transferred to the gate-booth at Bellevue Hospital to direct ambulance traffic. After his appointment, 4 other openings where provided for African Americans. Wright was later promoted to the rank of assistant visiting surgeon. In efforts to integrate the hospital, Wright helped establish a nursing school at Harlem Hospital that admitted qualified African American students. He also sought to create a residency program in surgery and to open all postgraduate training programs in the hospital to qualified African American applicants In 1943 Wright became the Director of Surgery at the institution and a well-respected medical leader in New York. Wright envisioned strengthening the health of African American citizens and creating professional opportunities for African American physicians and nurses through the racial integration of existing private and municipal hospitals that were staffed exclusively by White doctors and nurses. His efforts succeeded locally, so that by 1946, more than 25% of Harlem Hospital's medical and surgical staff were of African American descent, and all the residency programs were open to qualified applicants regardless of race, color, or national origin.

After United States declared war against Germany, Wright enlisted in the army and was given the initial rank of First Lieutenant. Wright was assigned to Camp Upton on Long Island, New York, where he met his wife. While serving in the Army Medical Corps during the First World War, he introduced intradermal vaccination for smallpox. In 1948 he was hailed as the first clinician to investigate the treatment of humans with Aureomycin.

Until his death in 1952, Dr. Wright was a relentless opponent of racial prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. He stood solidly in favor of a responsive, fully integrated Harlem Hospital, which he considered to be the social obligation of the city of New York to provide. He stood equally firm in opposition to the social alternative of a privately funded, "charity" hospital which would remove the need for the city to meet its obligations of integrating hospitals. He is especially remembered for his conviction that "what the Negro physician needs is equal opportunity for training and practice--no more, nor less."

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