

Canada's Black surgeons faced ignorance, prejudice during America's Civil War

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - February 2026

They were brilliant men of medicine, with courage beyond measure. They served despite being grossly disrespected, and rendered first-class care while being relegated to second-class status. Their names are, regrettably, little known today, by other than the odd Canadian historian and a few men and women of medical academia.

That is a shame, for they deserve better.

Born in 1825 to free parents in Norfolk, Virginia, Alexander Thomas Augusta was denied admission to medical schools in the United States, due solely to the colour of his skin. Consequently, he headed north, becoming the first Black doctor to graduate from a Canadian medical school -- Trinity College at the University of Toronto. After completing his education, Dr. Augusta practiced for several years as a physician in Toronto and advocated against racism. He then returned to the U.S. and worked to promote civil rights.

In 1863, with Civil War raging in the United States, Dr. Augusta sought to enlist as a medical officer in the Union Army. Less than six months earlier, the Battle of Antietam had witnessed the bloodiest day in American history, with 23,000 casualties. The nation desperately needed more doctors.

In his book *The North Star*, Julian Sher describes Dr. Augusta's examination before the army's medical review board. After accepting Dr. Augusta and commissioning him as a major in the medical corps, the officer-physician who had examined him was upbraided by a senior officer.

"Why did you let that damn (N-word) in?" demanded the officer.

"Because", the examining physician replied, "that damn (N-word) knew more than I did. How could I keep him out?"

In 1837, in Toronto, another Black man was born who was destined for Canadian fame. Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott became the first Canadian-born student to graduate from a Canadian medical school. In 1863, he joined Dr. Alexander Augusta as a Lieutenant in the Union Army, becoming one of eight Black doctors serving both injured "colored" troops and civilians. Both doctors practiced at the Freedman's Hospital in Washington.

It can be difficult for us, today, to comprehend the degree of emotional toll suffered by these two men in an atmosphere of racial hatred. In 1955, Rosa Parks sparked an Alabama bus boycott when she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Almost a century earlier, Dr. Alexander Augusta, in the uniform of a major in his nation's armed forces in a time of war, was physically ejected from a Washington streetcar for the same offense. These two brilliant surgeons were driven by a devotion to their science, and a degree of compassion that led them to serve where they were needed. In doing so, despite confronting daily bigotry, they helped to shatter racial barriers and earn respect. Dr. Augusta would go on to become the first African-American professor of medicine in the United States. That country recognized his service following his death in Washington in 1890. He became the first Black military officer buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Dr. Anderson Abbott's contributions would also eventually be acknowledged. He became one of the first Black men invited to a presidential reception. When Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre, Dr. Abbott was one of the doctors attending the mortally wounded president. Mary Todd Lincoln, in recognition of Dr. Abbott's service to her slain husband, presented him with one of the president's shawls. It remains a treasured family artifact today in the keeping of Dr. Abbott's great-granddaughter. Dr. Abbott returned to Toronto after the war to become Canada's first full-time practicing Black physician.

In 2024, Trinity College unveiled Gordon Shadrach's brilliant portrait of Dr. Augusta. Suitably titled, "Mend", the artist's remarkable talent helps to cast a light on this little-known chapter in Canada's Black History.