

## Friday Memory - Rethinking the Honors Bestowed

By: Elaine Buck

Tuesday morning, April 17, 2018 the local news broadcasted the removal of a statute honoring Dr. J. Marion Sims from Central Park in New York City. Dr. Sims, heralded as the “Father of Gynecology,” was a White doctor who practiced medicine in Alabama 1835 to 1849. So why is this conversation relevant to today and how it harkens back to the debate that American grappled with some months ago?

You remember the hot button issues surrounding the removal of Confederate statutes--those icons erected to commemorate certain individuals for the roles they played during the ugliest time in our nation’s history. I will ask you to consider why J. Marion Sims was included in the list of the revered and chosen to stand as an icon in American history; a statute that was not rooted in the culture of the deep south but comfortably ensconced in the City of New York.

So who is Dr. J. Marion Sims, you’re probably wondering. Dr. Sims is a man who performed experimental surgeries on enslaved black women; surgery without anesthesia. Known as a pioneer for correcting fistulas, these young girls suffered from incontinence usually caused either by rape or from giving birth at too young an age. Anarcha Wescott was a fourteen year old enslaved mulatto girl who was the victim of over thirty surgeries performed by Dr. Sims. It’s been reported that Anarcha was among roughly a dozen slaves whom Dr. Sims repeatedly used to perform experiments through arrangements he made with the owners of these young women.

Through deals struck with the owners, these young women literally became human guinea pigs because Sims held the firm belief that Black women were incapable of feeling pain. To add to this unfathomable cruelty, these surgeries were often witnessed by dozen of doctors who studied Dr. Sims notes and agreed that he was on the dawn of a great medical discovery.

It’s now 2018 and over 150 years since these young enslaved women had to endure this brutality. Statues such as this, in the north and south, have long promoted a flawed reverence of individuals that people have had to walk past every day as they went about their lives. Understand, these monuments are being removed, not destroyed, from a public place revered by some and despised by others because every hero has been created by someone.

My research partner, Beverly Mills and I recognized the connection between this story and those mentioned in Craig Steven Wilder’s book “Ebony and Ivy”. In this book Wilder outlines the horrific manner in which enslaved men and women were regarded as savages and cultural artifacts, akin to monkeys and orangutans and not worthy of humane treatment. Shockingly, it was not just the medical community in the United States and abroad that experimented on people of color at their universities and medical schools. This practice also took place right here in the Dutch slaveholding belt between Elizabeth and Trenton, New Jersey.

Once again, Beverly and I are rendered speechless by the heinous deeds perpetrated by scholars in the medical field against women of color and add the name of Anarcha Wescott to be remembered in the dark truth of American history.