



**Metropolitan Water
Reclamation District
of Greater Chicago**



2022 MWRD AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH

Robert Tanner Freeman

Robert Tanner Freeman is the first professionally trained black dentist in the United States. A child of slaves, he eventually entered Harvard University and graduated only four years after the end of the Civil War in 1869.

Robert Tanner Freeman was born in Washington, D.C. in 1846. His formerly enslaved parents took the surname "Freeman" as did countless other people after gaining their freedom from bondage. As a child, Robert befriended Henry Bliss Noble, a local white dentist in the District of Columbia. Freeman began working as an apprentice to Dr. Noble and continued until he was a young adult. Dr. Noble encouraged young Robert to apply to dental colleges.

Two medical schools rejected Freeman's application but with the encouragement of Dr. Noble who had contacts at Harvard Medical School, Freeman applied there. Initially rejected, he was accepted into Harvard Medical School in 1867 at the age of 21, after a petition by Dean Nathan Cooley Keep to end the school's historical exclusion of African Americans and other racial minorities.

Robert Tanner Freeman and classmate George Franklin Grant became the first blacks to enter the 1867 Harvard Dental School inaugural class of sixteen. Upon Freeman's graduation in 1869, he and Grant became the first African American dentists in the United States. Dr. Freeman returned to Washington, D.C. after his graduation to open his own practice.

He became a pillar in the D.C. black community because of his commitment to mentoring other African American youth interested in the medical profession. Unfortunately, his death came in 1873, only four years after he received his dental school degree. While working in Washington, D.C., he contracted a water-borne disease although the records are unclear as to the specific disease.

