On October 12, 1904, Alexizine Montague Cobb and William Elmer Cobb introduced the world to William Montague Cobb. Born in Washington D.C in a segregated neighborhood, Cobb attended a segregated elementary school, Patterson Elementary, and a segregated high school, Dunbar High. Dunbar, still a prestigious high school, had African American teachers with advanced degrees. Because many universities did not hire African American professors, most of them ended up as teachers at segregated high schools. Cobb’s experience at segregated primary schools opened his eyes to the oppression people of color face. After graduating from Dunbar in 1921, Cobb moved to Massachusetts and matriculated at Amherst College with a scholarship. During his tenure at Amherst College, Cobb was a cross-country runner, a boxer and a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated. After earning his Bachelors of Arts in 1925, Cobb earned the Blodgett scholarship by doing research in embryology at the Woods Hole’s Marine Biology Laboratory with Dr. Ernest Everett Just. While doing research under Dr. Just, Cobb became skilled at taking conscientious notes and drawings, a skill that became one of his hallmarks. Cobb was able to earn enough money by working in the Hole’s lab to matriculate at the Howard University College of Medicine. During his time at Howard University College of Medicine, Cobb worked and went to school. He worked at the Great Lakes Steamship, the
Saskatchewan Frontier and during his fourth year of medical school he worked in the embryology lab as an instructor. He then went on to complete his internship at the Howard University Hospital, formally known as the Freedmen’s Hospital, where he became a board certified physician. He eventually left to open a private practice in the Washington D.C community. Dr. Cobb then moved to Cleveland, Ohio and attended Case Western University, formally Western Reserve University, on a fellowship grant. There Dr. Cobb worked with Thomas Wingate Todd as he trained in gross anatomy and physical anthropology. Todd’s focus was on proving that race was not a determinant factor in brain development. Cobb became the first African American to earn a PhD in physical anthropology in 1932. After Cobb earned his PhD, he moved back to Washington D.C. to work as an assistant professor in the School of Medicine and began his own research. From 1932 to 1969, Dr. Cobb was able to build the Cobb Human Skeletal Collection. His collection and work eventually led him to political activism. His collection and his research made an impact in the public health of African Americans throughout America.

His Work

During his last tenure at Howard University Medical School, the school was in a state of transition. The first appointed black president felt that the black students in the medical school were not getting the best education that they could receive from the mostly all white faculty. So he began to recruit black faculty, which was very hard to do during this time period. To combat this, the dean of the school picked the top students to send to graduate school. Dr. Cobb was one of three chosen and he was sent to Western Reserve University, as mentioned above, to receive training in gross anatomy and physical anthropology. Dr. Cobb began his training under T. Wingate Todd, one of the leading anthropologists during the time. Todd believed that there were no racial differences between whites and blacks. He studied the brains of children and came to the conclusion that there were no biological differences in the development of the brain, but that physical conditions, and the toll of life produced slower growth in some children. This way of thinking would shape Dr. Cobb, and influence his work in later years. Upon his completion of graduate school he returned to Howard University eager to start work in his own laboratory. Dr. Cobb went on to publish multiple journals and dissertations. In his work he sought out to highlight African Americans in a positive light considering their circumstances instead of highlight the negative. Dr. Cobb began attending meetings of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. At these meeting anthropologists could come together and have think tanks. From these meetings Dr. Cobb developed life long friends but also experienced racism. While most of his colleagues came to accept him they did not want him to have powerful positions that could end with him having power over them.

Growing up Dr. Cobb was athletically gifted; training himself in boxing and also track and cross-country. This predisposition to sports drew him to study the relationship between race and athletics. The 1936 Olympics that took place in Berlin, Germany caused much uproar when Jesse Owens, a black man, won four gold medals. Many came to believe that blacks had certain biological characteristics that would make them better at sports than their white counterparts. Dr. Cobb disagreed. He argued that there was not sufficient evidence to support this claim. He measured Jesse Owens’ legs and other body parts and determined that statistically he had body parts on average measure with both whites and blacks. Cobb came to the conclusion that Owens’ training is what caused him to perform well and not his biological make up. Cobb published his findings in Race and Runners. Dr. Cobb utilized all of his experiences in life, and different mentors and colleagues to develop his own way of thinking.
Cobb (1904-1990): Physical Anthropologist, Anatomist, and Activist by Lesley M. Rankin-Hill and Michael L. Blakey describe the Cobbian tradition/perspective that is described by these characteristics:

1. An emphasis on Afro-Americans (the “Negro”) in their biological diversity, with a discarding of Hrdlika’s principal focus on the study of a pure race (e.g., Cobb 1941, 1942a, 1942b).

2. A heightened emphasis on the social and historical factors, relative to evolutionary factors, as major forces affecting human biology (e.g., Cobb 1935, 1939a).

3. A thorough demonstration of human equality, not only by presenting the positive attributes of Afro Americans and their plasticity as Boas had done but uniquely balancing his argument by recognizing weaknesses that were simultaneously present in European society: “The defects of modern European civilization are so obvious, particularly in respect to its dependence on exploration and periodic slaughter and its failure to adjust population size and caliber to resources, that while its material achievements excite amazement, its social organization hardly evokes excessive admiration” (Cobb 1939a:324).

4. Cobb developed in his research and leaching a rich integration of art, literature, philosophy, history, physical anthropology, and anatomy that has been unusual among physical anthropologists. Throughout the history of physical anthropology, its practitioners have been more concerned with the natural sciences than with the social sciences or, least of all, the humanities. Without questioning its integration with the natural sciences, Cobb uses anatomy to explore beauty. Other examples are illustrated in his published leaching methods – “Graphic Approach,” (Cobb 1945); “Artistic Canons” (Cobb 1944); and “Master Keys” (Cobb 1943b) – that integrate anatomy with art, history, archeology, preventive medicine, and clinical medicine. As a college instructor, he was known to recite poetry and play the violin to demonstrate points he wanted to make regarding anatomy.

This Cobbian tradition/perspective is seen developed in his works. In the Physical Anthropology of the American Negro he uses this approach to highlight the anthropology of African Americans. He discusses the lack of progress in the study of African Americans. During the time of publication there was not much literature devoted to the study of blacks. Dr. Cobb issues a call to action to further the development of this study. He suggests the instillation of classes devoted to physical anthropology with primary focus on African Americans. He emphasizes not only the importance of having them, but also ensuring that the classes are well run and of the level of post-graduate. He describes the need for accurate statistical study. In his experience small series created bad statistics that eventually ruined the validity of studies. He suggests that educational institutions do accurate small studies so a cumulative accurate report can be done. Dr. Cobb also lists that there should be a standard way of measuring and recording data. He states that there must be more laboratories and staff trained in black anthropology must be created. Dr. Cobb’s ultimate goal was to spread education to everyone. This education included the study of African-Americans, which was always left out, or told from a flawed and racist perspective. In his work Dr. Cobb set out to first describe the problem that was at hand and then to relay solutions to fix the problems.
Cobb Collection

Dr. Cobb utilized his medical degree to further his research in anthropology. He used biological and medical relationships to draw relationships in his work. Dr. Cobb wanted to highlight the toll that racism took on African Americans. His counterparts argued that there were biological differences between blacks and whites that contributed to blacks being inferior to whites. Dr. Cobb was the first to argue that demographics and racism had health effects on African Americans that could not only cause disease but also slowed development. When studying bones Dr. Cobb not only examined the physical condition of the bones, but also took into account societal issues. He looked into what was going in society during the person’s life to explain their physical shortcomings. He argued that desegregation was needed to improve the health of African Americans; especially desegregation in medical school. Beginning in 1932 he began to collect cadavers, from the anatomy dissecting room, and also collected medical records. He established the Laboratory of Anatomy and Physical Anthropology in the medical school at Howard University. The lab “was outfitted with eighteen cruciform dissecting tables, eleven museum cases, and large sinks at each end of the room”- pretty impressive for the funding and support he was given (Quigley 115). The collection holds over 700 skeletons, and over 900 anatomical records on individuals. Little support was given to further the advancement of the collection; nonetheless Dr. Cobb pushed on and was the first to prepare a collection of mostly African Americans. The collection highlights blacks living in the Washington D.C area between the years of 1930’s-1969. From his collection the most prominent cause of death was found to be cardiovascular disease. This lab has been compared to that of his mentors. This collection is not only unique due to the fact of the large amount of African Americans it holds but also because it frames the eastern, more specific Washington D.C area. This collection can accurately describe what life was like for African Americans during this time and can also chronicle their daily activities. In 1992 the collection was moved from the medical school, to the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University.

His Impact

Dr. Cobb’s impact can be found not only in the scientific community but also in the progress African Americans have made since the 1900s. Cobb made an impact everywhere he went. From 1932 to 1969 Cobb worked at Howard University Medical school and the impact of his work can be seen today on campus. During his tenure at Howard University, Dr. Cobb took on many roles in organizations on Howard University campus and in the surrounding D.C community. He served as a member of the board of directors of the Friends of the National Zoo, chairman of the D.C. Public Health Advisory Council and the D.C. Citizens Advisory Committee to Reduce Litter, secretary of the Anatomical Board of the District of Columbia and on the executive committee of the White House Conference on Health. Located on the second floor of Fredrick Douglass hall on Howard University’s campus, the W. Montague Cobb Research Laboratory houses the Cobb Human Skeleton Collection. The collection contains the records of about 987 people and more than 700 documented skeletons. What makes this collection different from any other in the world is that it contains the skeletons of African Americans in the D.C area. Currently the lab is working with remains from the New York African Burial Ground under the director of the lab, Dr. Fatimah Jackson. Dr. Cobb’s lab is currently carrying out his mission of training the next generation of physical anthropologists.
Outside of Howard University, Dr. Cobb had an impact that changed the face of medicine. In November of 1929, Aleˇs Hrdliˇcka founded the American Association of Physical Anthropologists with a goal to prove that White Europeans were genetically superior to Blacks and other minority races. Hrdliˇcka, however, faced opposition in his research from several scientists. Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, and T. Wingate Todd criticized the idea that the differences in the genetic makeup of the different races made one race superior to the other. When Cobb entered the field of physical anthropology, the debate over racial determinism was at an all time high. Some physical anthropologists believed that African Americans were naturally inferior to Whites due to their genetic makeup while others aimed to disprove scientific racism. When Cobb first opened his lab he made it a point to note that the purpose of his lab was to prove that African Americans are not physically or mentally inferior simply because of their race. In order to prove that African Americans were not inferior to Whites based on race, Cobb had to do something no other scientist had dared to do before, Cobb had to create a collection of African American skeletons and records.

From his research and analyses, Cobb came to the conclusion that in the debate of “nature vs. nurture”, nurture wins. Rather than classifying a group of people as inferior due to their genetics, Cobb’s theory was that the idea of inferiority or superiority was dependent on an individual level based on the environment of development. Cobb aimed and encouraged others to use science to address and solve social problems. In his most famous publication “Race and Runners”, Cobb entered the debate that the quadruple gold medalist, Jesse Owens, was an incredible athlete because African Americans’ athleticism took the place of their cognitive intelligence. By using his skeletons and analyzing the different bones involved in runner and jumping, Cobb was able to prove that there was no significant difference between the skeletal makeup of a European Caucasian in relation to an African American. Cobb was the first physical anthropologist to step outside the debate of racial determinism and address public health issues that affected minority groups, specifically African Americans. Cobb believed that one of the reasons African Americans in the United States lived less healthy lives in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts was due to a social issue, racism. In 1957, Cobb began the Imhotep conferences with the focus on hospital integration. The main goal of this conference was to increase the enrollment of African Americans into segregated medical schools. Through this conference Cobb wanted to not only integrate medical schools but also get rid of segregated hospitals. Like many “separate but equal” entities, hospitals that treated African Americans and other minorities often lacked adequate resources and professionals with less than adequate education. This conference continued until the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed by the United States congress. By showing that racism had a significant impact of the health of Blacks in the District of Columbia, Cobb opened the door for Blacks physicians into the D.C. General Hospital and the Medical Society of the District of Columbia. While Cobb advocated for Blacks through his research, he also did research that was not specifically targeted toward African Americans. Cobb conducted research on the aging of skeletons, compared dental anatomies and the demography of cadavers. Cobb’s work helped increase the awareness of anthropology by mixing anthropology with other fields. One of his biggest contributions to science that is often overlooked is his contribution to the creation of the current representation of the heart used by students, scientist and doctors all around the world.

Dr. Cobb’s contribution to the United States of America was not just scientific, he also had a social impact which had an impact on the overall heath of Americans. Cobb believed in using his work to implement change and that he did. Cobb
served of many civil rights organizations that combined medicine and anthropology, in some organizations. He even held leadership roles. He served as the two-term president for the oldest black medical society, the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, and edited the organization’s bulletin for about forty-five years. He also served as the editor and editor emeritus of the National Medical Association from 1949 till his death. Dr. Cobb was an active member of the National Urban League and Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. In the 1940’s, Cobb used his expertise on physical anthropology to testify in front of the United States senate in support of the National health insurance program. In 1965, he served again as an expert witness but this time in front of Congress. Cobb used his expertise to testify for health care legislation and his expertise, in addition to that of others, helped passed Medicare. In 1969 Dr. Cobb took a one-year leave from Howard University. This was due to a student protest that argued that Dr. Cobb was a symbol of the Black power movement. Medical students boycotted his classes because they wanted more of a clinical education that would better prepare them for the boards that they had to take. Dr. Cobb was forced to leave his position in the Department of Anatomy. However Dr. Cobb’s impact at the university was so deep that faculty members fought for him to come back and to have his position reinstated.

Dr. Cobb’s biggest role as a social activist came in 1976 when he served as executive president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Dr. Cobb served as president from 1976 to 1983.

**His legacy**

Dr. William Montague Cobb’s legacy lives on in the 6000 medical and dental students he taught at Howard University, the researchers that had the pleasure to work in his lab and all the lives they have touched ever since. On November 20th, 1990, Dr. Cobb passed away due to heart ailments and pneumonia. Although he has passed, the work of this pioneer still lives on. Dr. Cobb is remembered as the trailblazer who opened the door for scientists that want to implement social change. Dr. Cobb published more than 1,100 papers on a large range of topics and authored more than 200 books on African American physicians. Dr. Cobb is the recipient of over 100 awards and citations. One of the most prestigious honors he earned was the Henry Gray Award for outstanding contributions to anatomy. Dr. Cobb also held many honorable degrees from many colleges and universities. In 1970 he became Howard University’s first distinguished professor. His most prestigious recognition came the year he passed away. In 1990 Dr. Cobb was recognized by the American Medical Association for his service to the science and art of medicine in the form of the Distinguished Service Award. The distinguished service award is the most prestigious award given by the American Medical Association and to earn it means that Dr. Cobb truly changed the face of medicine.

In addition to science, Dr. Cobb’s legacy can be seen in society. His contribution to civil rights cases has given many Americans, regardless of race, healthcare. He was a part of the team of lawyers, witness and advocates that led to the passage of Medicare and that helped with the passing of other health care laws, more recently Obamacare.

**Summary**

The articles that were utilized in writing this paper provided great insight into the world and mind of Dr. Cobb. These articles however did seem to show some bias for the doctor. There was never any mention of anyone who had refuted his work or objected to his way of thinking. It is hard to believe that not one single person refuted his work; especially during his time where
racism was very much apparent. The articles did draw comparisons to his mentors and how his perspective differed from theirs. It would have been interesting to know what his counterparts, such as Charles B. Davenport or Margaret Mead, thought of him and his work.

Dr. Cobb was an astounding man who opened up the doors for African Americans in the medical and teaching field. His dedication to his work and social equality is outstanding and remarkable. Dr. Cobb pioneered the way for so many people and was never shy to speak his mind. He always spoke his opinion and backed it up with evidence, so that his counterparts could do nothing but respect him. Dr. Cobb understood that education was the way that African Americans could move up the ladder and change the way society worked. This is why he fought so hard for desegregation, and the incorporation of black anthropology into the curriculum. Dr. Cobb believed if he taught people the truth then racism could ultimately be stopped, and new laws could be put into place.

It is also very commendable that Dr. Cobb spent his entire career at Howard University. Most, if and when they achieved his level and status, would go to more premier (white) universities to attain more recognition. However he stayed and created the largest collection of bones that contains African Americans. It is believed that Dr. Cobb does not and did not get the recognition he deserved because he stayed at Howard University. It is a shame that during his time there was so much discrimination of blacks that would not allow his work to be distributed and taught in white universities. Also a reason that Dr. Cobb is not more recognized is due to his subject matter. If one is to Google “top anthropologists”, Dr. Cobb’s name will not appear on any of the top sites. This is truly sad, but is the world that we live in. Dr. Cobb’s work focused on showing how demographics and racial disparities played a major role on the development of African Americans and that biological make up had little to nothing to do with it. This is still a subject that society is not ready to deal with or talk about. Dr. Cobb went out on a limb to base his life work on that, knowing that especially during this time he would not receive the recognition that he deserved from his white counterparts. It is time that African-Americans pick up where Dr. Cobb left off to continue his legacy, and to keep his name alive.

Dr. Cobb lived a life that many can only dream of living. Through his passion for both anthropology and medicine, he was able to break racial boundaries and put a dent in the system of racism that plagues the United States. His dedication to Howard University and the African American community has significantly impacted the health of African Americans in the Washington D.C area and the United States. His work as an activist opened the door for many African American nurses, doctors and other health care professionals into segregated medical facilities. Dr. Cobb’s impact is indescribable and it is a shame more people are not aware of his contributions to the world we live in. ***

Works Cited


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