

Dr. J. J. Gould Bias

Dr. James Joshua Gould Bias (1807-1860) was an abolitionist, preacher, and active participant in the Underground Railroad. He was born into slavery in Maryland. Bias acquired medical knowledge while working for a physician. After securing his freedom, he moved to Philadelphia with his wife, [Eliza Bias](#).¹ He attended the Eclectic Medical College in Philadelphia and graduated from the institution in 1852.² Bias was one of the few African American doctors able to obtain formal medical training during the period.³ He set up practice in Philadelphia, providing medical and dental services to Black residents.¹

Devoted to aiding fugitives, Bias welcomed the wearied and the sick into his home, tending to their medical needs. Activist and former slave William Parker recalls Bias's kindness to a fugitive named George: "[George] was nursed and attended by the late Dr. James Joshua Gould Bias, one of the faithful few, whose labors for the oppressed will never be forgotten, and whose heart, purse, and hand were always open to the poor, flying slave. God has blessed him, and his reward is obtained."⁴ Parker's book, *The Freedman's Story: In Two Parts*, is one of the few to acknowledge Bias's invaluable contribution. *The Freedman's Story* was published six years after Bias's death. Parker understood that linking Bias's name to the Underground Railroad before the doctor's death would have had legal repercussions, but clearly Parker's single encounter with Bias was enough to compel Parker to honor the doctor's memory.

Bias played an active role in the Colored Conventions movement and was a leading figure in Philadelphia's activist community. He held a number of different positions at the conventions including chair, vice president, and member of the Committee on Education.⁴ Bias was extremely active outside of the conventions as well. He was a founding member of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, which assisted thousands of enslaved Blacks seeking freedom. Bias was influential in the Black religious community as a preacher at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where he supported female requests to preach.⁵ Moreover, he played an integral role in the growth of Black fraternal orders as a member of both the Odd Fellows and the Masons alongside other African American leaders David Bowser and Jonathan Davis.⁶ Relatively little of his writing remains today, and his major 1859 work, "Synopsis of Phrenology, and the Phrenological Developments," did not survive. However, later Black scholars utilized his research to disprove alleged scientific evidence of Black inferiority.⁷

Dr. J. J. Gould Bias, along with Martin Delaney and other African American activists, endorsed emigration but denounced the [American Colonization Society](#) (ACS). They believed that emigration should not be initiated or controlled by whites. Despite his views on emigration, there is little evidence Bias travelled abroad during his lifetime. He spent the majority of his life in Philadelphia traveling occasionally for conferences and meetings.⁸ James had ties to a number of other Black activists including Frederick Douglass, Robert Purvis, and Harriet Purvis.⁹

Dr. Bias is a figure rarely mentioned in historical scholarship although he was extraordinarily well known within Philadelphia's Black community during his life.¹⁰ The multitudes of enslaved Blacks whom he assisted demonstrate his valuable historical role and illustrate

how deeply influential historical figures can be overlooked by historians. Although little of Bias's own writing is available for study, his activities and popularity among the city's Blacks help partially fill the many archival silences and give a glimpse into his life and historical significance.

References

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[2] While the Eclectic Medical College of Pennsylvania has come to be regarded as a fraudulent enterprise, it was once a reputable medical school. At the time Bias attended, the college was reputable. "Swindling," *Capitalism by Gaslight: The Shadow Economic of 19th-Century America*, Library Company of Philadelphia, 2012. [Link](#)

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[6] Joseph Cox, *Great Black Men of Masonry*, (Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., 2002), 49; Handy, "Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History,"346; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 75-7.

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[9] Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 88, 93.

[10] Jones, *All Bound Up Together*, 75-7; "Great Anti-Colonization Meeting" *The North Star* (April 29, 1852), Accessible Archives; Louis R. Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," *Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 1 (1916), 180-1.

[11] Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History*, 346-7.

Credits

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Eliza Ann Bias

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DIED:

In Philadelphia, on the 11th inst., after a severe and lingering illness of nearly 3 years, which she bore with Christian resignation, **MRS. ELIZA ANN**, consort of Dr. James J. Gould-Sin, aged 42 years.

From an early period of her life she has been an active and untiring participant in the anti-slavery ranks, and aided many flying fugitives from the prison of American Slavery, to find shelter in the British dominions of Victoria. "She remembered all who were in bonds as bound with them;" her doors were always open for their reception and her hospitality was extended to them with an unsparring hand, a fact which hundreds in Canada to-day could corroborate who have received her bounty. In her death the fugitive has lost a firm, faithful, and unflinching friend. Her remains were attended to their last resting place, by a numerous retinue of mourning associates and friends. She died the death of the righteous, and in the great speech of the Gentiles, (in her last moment) she was enabled to exclaim: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith and am now about to receive a crown of glory that is incorruptible, undefiled and that fadeth not away."

"The world is sleeping;
Angels weep on my grave; my soul
With angels weeps; my
Land, land, your wings; I thank I fly;
O grave, where is thy victory,
O death, where is thy sting?"

Eliza Ann Bias, wife of Dr. James Joshua Gould Bias, played a large part in the anti-slavery movement in Philadelphia.¹ Born around 1815 in Maryland, Eliza spent her life helping slaves gain their freedom and raising her daughter.² Although she lived in Philadelphia, she aided runaway slaves to flee to Canada, because of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Along with her husband, Eliza Ann Bias acted as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Moreover, she was a member of the Ladies' Sanitary Association of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church (LSASTC).³ Working with other Black elite women, Bias raised funds for African American soldiers and other charitable institutions.

Bias was always mindful of the suffering of others and sought to ameliorate it. She was committed to education and social reform, and, as a member of the Female Literary Association (FLA), she was constantly engaged in dialogues that tackled the political and social issues at the time.⁴ FLA members saw it as their "duty to develop their God-given intellectual powers" and shared their writings by having them published in *The Liberator*.⁵

According to the newspaper article on Eliza Ann Bias, Eliza demonstrated strong Christian faith, even in the midst of her three-year illness. Most of her obituary centers on her faith in Christ and how she lived a good Christian life. The writer of the obituary portrayed Eliza Ann Bias as an angel that broke the chains of bondage for every slave in America. Eliza Ann Bias died young, and many mourned her death. Eliza Ann Bias did not leave behind a plethora of information, but the little that remains provides an insight into the life of a Black female activist.

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