Tracking Down the First Recorded Sickle Cell Patient in Western Medicine

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In 1910, the first article describing a case of sickle cell anemia appeared in Archives of Internal Medicine. In 1987, a historian of African American medical history, Todd Savitt, took advantage of an opportunity to research the circumstances behind the publication of that first article and identify the people (patient and physicians) involved. Savitt recounts his “adventures” in tracing the story to its origins in the West Indies.

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On Saturday night, July 25, 1987, British West Indies Airlines flight 401 touched down at the airport Cuban workers and advisors had abandoned in the midst of construction 4 years earlier when US troops invaded Grenada. My goal, as I disembarked the DC-9 and passed through Grenadian customs for a week’s stay on the island, was to learn about a more peaceable and much lesser known link between the 2 countries—sickle cell disease (SCD). SCD has plagued residents of certain parts of Africa and their descendants in the Americas for centuries. Medical researchers have found in several African languages evidence of words that described or named a disease that was more than likely sickle cell anemia. My own research into the diseases of American slaves also revealed evidence of the presence of SCD during that period.

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Sickle cell genes are present in more than 2 million Americans, 80,000 to 100,000 of whom manifest any of the conditions we now label as sickle cell disease. Most people in the United States with sickle cell genes have African ancestry. One must inherit a sickle cell gene from both parents to have SCD. A person who inherits a sickle cell gene from just 1 parent (approximately 1 in 12 African Americans), is said to have sickle cell trait and leads a normal and healthy life, but may pass that gene on to his or her offspring. Those with SCD usually have a shortened lifespan, suffering frequent illnesses and painful attacks known as sickle cell crises.

In 1910, an article appeared in the Archives of Internal Medicine describing, for the first time, the disease that soon came to be known as sickle cell anemia (SCA). Dr James Bryan Herrick (1861-1954), author of the article, related the case of “an intelligent 20-year-old Negro…professional student” from Grenada, British West Indies, who appeared at Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, complaining of respiratory and other problems. Dr Herrick’s intern, Dr Ernest E. Irons (1877-1959), examined the patient and found in his blood “peculiar, elongated, sickle-shaped red blood corpuscles” that neither doctor had ever previously encountered. Their search of the current medical literature revealed no other descriptions of the symptoms and blood picture they saw under the microscope. The 2 physicians followed the patient’s illness over the next 3 years, then lost track of him forever. Because neither physician had a strong interest in blood diseases, they apparently viewed this case as interesting but a peripheral curiosity unrelated to their own research and career concerns. (Dr Herrick soon became deeply involved in the study of heart disease and is credited with the first description and diagnosis of coronary thrombosis, while Dr Irons pursued interests in bacteriology and later served as dean of Rush Medical School in Chicago.) Neither man wrote or spoke much in later life about their discovery of SCD, though both lived into the era when medical science had recognized the importance and widespread distribution of the condition—yet early SCD researchers cited Dr Herrick’s 1910 article in their own publications and historians of SCD have pointed to the Herrick piece as a landmark.

I too had mentioned this article in some of my own historical writings and had idly wondered who the first sickle cell patient was, what he was doing in the United States, and what had been his fate. But years passed before mild curiosity turned to genuine interest. The catalyst was an offer from Dr Morton F. Goldberg, chairman of ophthalmology at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine and head of a unique...
sickle cell eye clinic, to look into a question that had been puzzling him for many years: what were the circumstances that allowed for SCD’s discovery in Chicago in the early 1900s? Dr Goldberg was willing to pay my research expenses and to provide his medical expertise. I couldn’t say no.

In Chicago at the turn of the century, the presence of 2 physicians astute enough to apply emerging blood staining and other hematological techniques in the workup of an anemic patient did not surprise me. But why this patient? Why not an African American newly migrated from Mississippi or Alabama? How did this young man find his way to Chicago and into the care of Drs Herrick and Irons? It was those questions that took me to Point Salines Airport that July 25, 1987, evening.

I arrived in Grenada possessing several bits of information gathered from 1.5 weeks of research in Chicago and Washington, DC. First and foremost, I knew the patient’s name. For centuries, published case histories have masked patients’ identities by using age and initials or first name only or entirely omitting any reference to name. Thus, physicians have earned reputations for their discoveries, but the patients who served as vehicles for these breakthroughs have remained, for good reason, anonymous. In the case of SCA, I felt justified in breaking the code of confidentiality while performing my research in order to learn more about the circumstances under which the disease was discovered. At the outset of my investigations, I was unsure whether I wished to, or would ever be allowed to, reveal the first SCD patient’s name. Once I had completed the work, however, I felt comfortable in stating (and had permission from a family member to state) that his name was Walter Clement Noel. (Some official documents spell the name Noël, presumably to indicate that the word is pronounced with 2 syllables.)

I saw that name for the first time on Monday, June 29, 1987, in the office of William Kona, archivist at Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke’s Medical Center in Chicago. I had written to him weeks earlier inquiring if the institution’s archives contained hospital records for the period. Yes, records existed, he replied, but to see them I would have to get permission from the medical center’s legal department. After weeks of trying, we finally obtained permission for me to look through the 1904 Presbyterian Hospital Register of Admissions. Mr Kona had previously located the entry, anticipating legal approval, and when my presence in Chicago forced the legal department to at last make its decision (in my favor, thankfully), he dramatically handed me a sheet of paper on which he had typed all the pertinent data from the admissions register. I now had several bricks with which to build a foundation for my story: Walter Clement Noel, age 20, a student at “Chicago Dental College,” living at a nearby rooming house, admitted upon the recommendation of Y. E. Whitmore and Albert C. Wands of the dental school, complaining of cough, fever, weakness, dizziness, and headache.

A dental student! In my mind I had pictured this “professional student” as attending medical or law school or a college of pharmacy, but not dental school. I knew from my research on medical education for African Americans that a number of West Indians had attended one of the dozen or so medical, dental, and pharmacy schools in the United States established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (Most had closed their doors by 1920.) So Noel’s presence in the United States fit that picture. But there were, to my knowledge, no black dental schools in Chicago at that time—only a black hospital, Provident, that trained black interns and nurses. So Noel was, I concluded, attending a “white” school.

Which one? Mr Kona and his assistant, Mary Jane Kirchner, knew of no school called the Chicago Dental College. A look in Prominent Physicians, Surgeons, and Medical Institutions of Cook County, In the Closing Year of the Nineteenth Century,12 published just a few years prior to Noel’s arrival in Chicago, revealed that a “Chicago College of Dental Surgery” stood quite near Presbyterian Hospital and Noel’s rented rooms. That school, Mr Kona thought, was now affiliated with Loyola University of Chicago. He suggested calling Brother Michael Grace, the school’s archivist. No answer there at the moment. Try later.

Dr Herrick’s 1910 article mentioned that he and especially Dr Irons saw the patient several times over the next 3 years, including 3 hospitalizations. But we could find no other entries in the Presbyterian Hospital admissions book for those years. Nor could we find in the Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke’s archives any other hospital records or any Irons or Herrick papers to help us out. Most people I had spoken with about my project had assumed, as had I, that this entire medical drama had unfolded at Cook County Hospital, the large public hospital in Chicago, rather than at the smaller, private Presbyterian Hospital. So the next logical step in my quest for information was to check the records of that institution.

The archivists’ network in Chicago, fortunately for me, was quite tight, so Mr Kona could quite easily call Terence Norwood, the man who ran the Cook County Hospital archives, and ask him to look through the appropriate hospital registers for admissions data on Walter Clement Noel. Mr Norwood kindly complied immediately and within an hour we had our answer. Noel had not been a patient in Cook County Hospital. That puzzled me. I decided to talk with Mr Norwood myself.

The Cook County Hospital archives were located on the top floor of the old hospital building. Its many unair-conditioned rooms contained a historian’s delight: piles of dusty old record books and file drawers and boxes of old papers. But none that contained Noel’s name. Mr Norwood was sympathetic and helpful but could do little other than show me a list of other archives in Chicago and offer me
Sickle cell is a lethal disease not because it kills but because it weakens the body’s defenses to other opportunistic intruders. Noel was 20 and sickly in December 1904. He remained sickly, according to Dr Herrick’s article, until April 1907, when presumably he died in obscurity somewhere in Chicago. After all, Drs Herrick and Irons, who had kept up with Noel for those years, suddenly lost track of him completely. (I had thought, at one point, of going through Chicago death and cemetery records, but that seemed an impossible task.) But Brother Grace gave me new hope that the trail continued beyond 1907. He first confirmed the fact that the Chicago College of Dental Surgery did in fact join Loyola University, though not until the 1920s. His archives did have dental school catalogues for the period of Noel’s attendance. He obligingly looked through those annual announcements while I sat across town in the Cook County archives. Yes, Noel’s name appeared as a student in several catalogues, but not Y. E. Whitmore’s or A. C. Ward’s as faculty members. (I had assumed that Presbyterian Hospital authorities would accept as character references for a young black male student’s admission to their hospital only the word of faculty members or administrators at the school—more on this shortly.) Can I come up and see these catalogues and photocopy them? Sure. And Brother Grace gave me directions.

In Chicago, the “el” is often as fast as or faster than the auto. But it couldn’t get me to the Lake Shore campus of Loyola quickly enough that afternoon. I made it with no hitches, but with just an hour or less before closing time for the archives. Brother Grace was quite accommodating. He showed me the catalogues. Noel, it turns out, graduated in 1907 with the class he had entered 3 years earlier! (The dental school had a 3-year curriculum.) The 2 men who had helped Noel during that first episode of illness in December 1904 had been senior students at the time. Noel had gone to Presbyterian Hospital because, according to the catalogues, the dental school had an arrangement with several hospitals in the vicinity whereby students, upon payment of a nominal fee, could receive medical attention at no further charge. The catalogues even contained a map of the area around the dental school that indicated locations of the hospitals. I copied the catalogues, and then talked a bit more with Brother Grace about other possible sources of information. The trail was getting warmer.

It was at this point, on the very first day of real research on the project, that I began thinking about the possibility of seeking records on Noel in Grenada. A very helpful lady at the American Dental Association had told me, after my noon-hour phone conversation with Brother Grace, that Noel’s name did not appear in any American dental directories for the period up to 1925 and wondered if there were international dental directories that might list Grenada or the British Empire. I began keeping my eyes peeled for such a resource, and also for some guides to archival holdings in Grenada. Perhaps I could make Noel into more than a shadowy figure who simply served as the first recorded sickle cell patient.

Brother Grace became a key figure in my research. The next afternoon, Tuesday, June 30, when I returned to the archives for follow-up on a few things, he suggested checking the Loyola Alumni Office, for we still did not know how long Noel lived. Untreated sickle cell patients do not tend to have long lives. The 1936 published compilation of Loyola alumni listed Noel as deceased but without any other information. The person in the dental school alumni office had no further information or records, but she suggested calling a couple of other offices, which I did the following day, Wednesday, rather half-heartedly, as each office in turn found nothing of use for me—until I called the dental school dean’s office.

Loyola University has 3 widely separated campuses in the Chicago area, making record keeping, record saving, and record tracking no mean task. Brother Grace really had a difficult coordinating job. The Loyola medical complex sits in Maywood, far from the Lake Shore campus. (Note: The dental school closed its doors in 1993.) Fortunately for me, the person who answered my phone inquiries at the dental school took an interest in my request for information on a person from a West Indian island far back in time. She remembered, at the last minute, as we were about to hang up, that there were some old microform records she could check. Yes, she said, there was a small file of material on Walter Clement Noel. Sure, I could come out and look at it. (I was using the phone in the Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke’s archives, where I had gone to double-check on a few details). She just had to clear my use of the records with her supervisor.

That turned out to be more difficult than just obtaining a simple “yes.” The supervisor informed her subordinate and then me that because of the Buckley Amendment, permission would have to be obtained from Noel’s family, since he was deceased, to look at those records. I had not heard much about the Buckley Amendment since its passage several years earlier. Coincidentally, just a few weeks prior to this Chicago research trip, the amendment came to my attention at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s parents’ orientation. My younger daughter was then a freshman at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. The rule stated that college records belong to the student, not the parents. I explained to the 2 women at Loyola that those records were my only key to finding his family and that was the very purpose of my research. I had no intention of using his school grades or evaluations in my
article. The supervisor did go look at the file and told me there was nothing of use to me in them anyway. She had to be firm about the rules because the university could be sued for violation of the law. I understood but felt frustrated because I didn’t know what was really contained in those records. I had to see them for myself. Brother Grace to the rescue!

I called him as a sympathetic friend. He listened, counseled reason, and gave me several names to call. The last one, after several calls to people who wished they could help but had no authority to open the records for me, was the university attorney, at the downtown campus. He was busy at the time, but his secretary promised he would call back.

I left Ms Kirchner’s number at the Rush archives and spent the last part of Wednesday afternoon at the University of Illinois at Chicago archives tracking down another part of the story. There I discovered, in US dental directories, that Yetts E. Whitmore had opened a dental practice in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, after graduation, and that Albert C. Wands had returned home to Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, to practice dentistry. I was deep into this research when Ms Kirchner called me from the Rush archives to inform me that Loyola’s attorney had returned my call and that, after hearing the nature of my request (Ms Kirchner had explained the situation to him), had agreed to consider it and call me back the next day.

Despite the temporary setbacks, I felt that my second and third days of research had moved me further along in the story. I had carefully gone through Chicago city directories (on microfilm) for 1904 through 1908, pinpointing on the very helpful map in the dental school catalogues the residences of Noel, fellow student Y. E. Whitmore, and physicians Herrick and Irons. The directories showed that Noel had lived across the street from Presbyterian Hospital, around the corner from his friend Y. E. Whitmore, 2 blocks from the dental school, and several blocks from Dr Herrick’s home, where Dr Irons also lived. All very compact and convenient. I felt satisfied—satisfied but still unsettled—because of the as-yet-unseen file at the dental school. Thursday proved to be the most eventful day of the trip, the day I saw that file and then some. I lingered a bit longer in my hotel room that morning, having taken a long early run and made several phone calls. As I was about to walk out for the day, the phone rang. Brother Grace had again helped matters along. He and the university attorney had talked and saw no reason why I couldn’t look at the file of a man so long deceased. Just use good judgment, the attorney cautioned, when it came time to publish the article. I couldn’t believe it! He called the supervisor to whom I had spoken the day before at the dental school and reported that he had granted me permission to see Noel’s records.

I hopped on a train and then a bus to Maywood and found the dental building. All along the second floor, as I made my way to the dean’s office, a composite picture of each year’s graduating class hung. I got more and more excited as I neared 1907. I would finally get to see Walter Clement Noel. Disappointment! Every class picture but 1907 hung on those walls. And to this day (in 2010) I have been unable to locate the missing class portrait.

But Noel’s file was wonderful. It contained no grades or records from his dental school days. What I found was a transcript of his courses and evaluations while at Harrison’s College, a prep school in Bridgetown, Barbados, and a few letters from Oliver Charles Arthur, a Grenadian dentist, to Dean Brophy of the Chicago College of Dental Surgery, arranging for Noel’s matriculation. (Arthur, I later discovered, had graduated from Howard University School of Dentistry in 1901 and returned to St George’s to practice.) These letters help explain the interest Noel had in studying dentistry and his enrollment in an American dental school.

One last letter in the file proved to be a gem, and the most important link I found to Noel’s past. It was written by his mother to the dean of the dental school just a few short weeks before her son left for 3 years in the United States: “I will be very glad if you would take an interest in him, and see that he does his work, especially as he is a stranger.” Only a mother with a soft spot for her son, a lot of confidence in herself, and some education could write such a letter to the dean of a foreign, essentially white, medical school. She signed the letter M. J. King, not Noel. Dr Herrick had mentioned in his 1910 article that Noel’s father had died “of accident,” so his mother must have remarried. And the return address was Duquesne Estate, St Patrick’s. Noel’s family must have had money to send him abroad for his education. Perhaps his mother had married a man of wealth, or perhaps his mother came to her marriages with land and money from her own family. These hints about “Clement” (as she called him in the letter) made me want to know more. An investigative trip to Grenada seemed even more imperative now.

This was Thursday, July 2. Most libraries and all archives would be closed tomorrow. I had but one more manuscript repository to visit and I had saved it for last because others who had looked through Dr Herrick’s papers at the University of Chicago library had told me I would find little if anything of interest. I, as a self-respecting historian, naturally had to see for myself. So I thanked Mary Hudall and Judy Stewart at the dental school for their help and bussed, trained, bussed again, and walked to south Chicago.

Arriving at the University of Chicago manuscript collection about an hour and a half before closing time, I looked through the extensive finding aid to the Herrick papers and selected 3 files that looked potentially promising. Dr Herrick had organized his published papers in folders, so I simply pulled the folder on his 1910 article. The first thing I found was 4 microscope slides—from a sample of Noel’s blood. These 4 slides appear as photomicrographs in the original article. I was actually hold-
ing Clement Noel’s sickled blood! It felt a little eerie.

Next, another surprise: Noel’s complete medical record from his month’s stay at Presbyterian Hospital, including notes on his medical history; physical exam; lab tests; fever, pulse, and blood pressure charts; and discharge summary. Then, a rough draft, in Dr Herrick’s handwriting, of the original SCD article. Next, some loose pieces of paper with citations to then-recent medical journal articles on yaws, hookworm disease, and alterations in red blood cell morphology that he and Dr Irons hoped might help explain the problems Noel displayed and the findings they had uncovered with their tests. One of those citations, a 1905 German article, may have given Dr Herrick the idea to describe Noel’s unusual red blood cells as “sickle-shaped.” And last, the climax to a week of researching, notes in Dr Irons’ hand of all his subsequent visits to Noel. Some had occurred at the Frances E. Willard National Temperance Hospital, an approved nearby hospital on the dental school list, while others had been home visits to Noel’s later rooming house, even closer to Drs Irons’ and Herrick’s home than his first rooming house. I rushed through these materials, shook my head in disbelief at my good fortune, and arranged to have the entire file photocopied.

Later that Thursday evening, I went back to Loyola’s medical complex to read through issues of The Bur, the dental school’s alumni magazine. Norman Gevitz, a fellow historian of medicine and at the time a faculty member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (he is now at Ohio University in Athens), had listened to my daily tales of excitement and frustration and given me valuable suggestions over the week. He lent me a book on the Chicago dental history that described the early years of the Chicago College of Dental Surgery and referred several times to The Bur. I did not find Clement Noel in this magazine, so I still did not know anything about his life subsequent to graduation or about the date of his death. But I did read some of the speeches he undoubtedly sat through or felt inspired by at each year’s opening and graduation exercises. Every bit of information helped me picture this young man’s life a little more clearly.

That evening, on the way home from Loyola, I almost lost all the material I had gathered over the week. The “el” car I sat in was almost empty at 11:00 as the Blue Line train pulled into the Racine stop. I had nodded off in my seat but was jerked wide awake by the commotion on the outside platform. Hundreds of noisy, excited teenagers suddenly pushed their way onto the train, having just left a rock concert at the University of Illinois at Chicago Pavilion. I stood up, knowing mine was the next stop, but found myself unable to move toward the doors because of the crowd. Two girls to whom I had promised my seat stood uncomfortably in the seat aisle, one with her back to the crowd. She got jostled around as several teens tried to take an older lady’s purse and others tried to stop them. I tried to help the lady off the train with her purse at the next stop and found myself in a tugging match with one young tough over my backpack. That cloth bag contained all the notes and photocopies I had gathered over the week, so I was not about to give it up. After a few seconds’ struggle, the kid let go and I careened out of the train door and into a metal billboard, stunned but safe. During the struggle, he had reached into my pocket—but the wrong one—so I had both money and research materials—a near disaster!

During my remaining day in Chicago (July 3) and a 2-day trip to Washington, DC, the following week, I used 2 of the finest libraries in the country—the University of Chicago library (the manuscript collection was closed but the main library was open) and the Library of Congress—to find out about existing records of and old published materials about Grenada. Fortunately for me, the British Colonial Secretary published annually from the late 1890s to 1920s the Grenada Handbook, a compendium of all sorts of useful information about the island. From these volumes I learned that Noel did return to Grenada, where he practiced dentistry from at least 1908 to 1916 in St George’s, the capital city. So he had lived with sickle cell for at least 9 more years, until age 32. And clearly he did not know that Drs Herrick and Irons had written an article about him and his disease. Nor did Drs Herrick and Irons know that Noel lived for all those years in Grenada practicing his profession. Too bad.

I also learned from that annual directory that, though Noel’s mother, Mary Justina King, was not listed, Samuel O. King was, as proprietor of Duquesne Estate in St Patrick’s Parish. The word proprietor led me to believe that Samuel King was the owner of Duquesne. (I later learned otherwise.) These and other books filled in enough background information to give me some sense of turn-of-the-century Grenada, but not enough to satisfy my curiosity about Walter Clement Noel the person. A guide to records of the Windward Islands indicated that, at the very least, I would find birth, death, and marriage records, as well as wills and deeds, in various libraries and government offices on the island. And perhaps I might even find descendants of Noel’s family to tell of Clement’s distinction as the first recorded sickle cell patient and thus complete the circle. So obsessed had I become with the search for information on Noel that I even spent a couple of hours in the US National Archives tracking down the ship on which he had sailed from Barbados to New York in September 1904. (He arrived on the SS Cearense, after an 8-day voyage, with $70 in his pocket and no train ticket to Chicago.) A research trip to Grenada became a “must” for me. So did a request for funding.

It took me only 3 days after my return home from Chicago to explain, in a long letter to Dr Goldberg, my reasons for wishing to go to Grenada and what I hoped to find. First, I told him that the project had “great
importance for the history of medicine.” Then I launched into my list of unanswered questions: How long had Noel practiced dentistry? He appeared, based on listings of dentists in the Grenada handbooks, to have died between 1912 and 1920, longer than I would have expected a SCD patient to survive in those days. What were his parents’ origins? Could the family be traced back to before the emancipation of slaves in the 1830s in Grenada? Or did they come from a different Caribbean island? Where in Africa did Noel’s ancestors originate? Did Noel marry and have children? If so, did the children inherit 1 or 2 genes from their parents—in other words, did they have sickle cell trait or disease?

A trip to Grenada would allow me to work through the available archival and governmental documents that could answer many of these and other questions. After providing a breakdown of projected costs for such a trip (approximately $1350, including a package deal of a week’s stay at a hotel plus airfare to and from Miami for $389), I concluded my letter of persuasion to Dr Goldberg by letting him know that I had already contacted Marilyn Marx at the Grenada Information Office in New York City and that she had given me “the names of several people to speak with in Grenada, people who can direct me to my sources. She assured me,” I continued, “that residents of the island know each other and will gladly assist me.” Happily, Dr Goldberg accepted my rationale and agreed to fund the Grenada research. So, just 3 weeks after my return from Chicago, I began an equally exciting research trip to Grenada. Ms Marx was, I soon discovered, quite right about the assistance I would receive on the island.

What an easy place in which to pursue my project! Our (my wife accompanied me on this trip, at our expense, of course) hotel, the Blue Horizon, served as a perfect base for my research activities. Its owners at the time, Arnold and Royston Hopkin, knew the island and its people well. I explained a bit about my project (excluding the sickle cell part) the first full day of our stay and they immediately took an interest in its success. During conversation that very afternoon with Arnold Hopkin, Dr John Watts, a local dentist and head of the Grenada tourist board, happened to walk by. He joined us and within 15 minutes had given me the name of a person whom he believed was a descendant of the family. (He was correct.)

The real research began on Monday morning in St George’s. I had called the public library there 2 weeks earlier (direct dial!) from North Carolina to find out the hours of operation and had spoken with a deep-voiced person whom I assumed to be male. My follow-up letter was addressed to Mr A. St Bernard. The woman who opened the library’s doors at 8:30 AM knew only a Mrs St Bernard employed there and she was not in, nor did anyone know when she was expected. I tried not to show my embarrassment and decided to come back later to apologize for my mistake.

The National Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths was located, I was told, just down the street from the library. And there it sat, one in a series of 2-story stucco and cinder block office buildings, backing just inches away from the water in the harbor. Doors and windows stood wide open against the heat of the day, intense even in early morning. I thought I was in the wrong place, that the old vital statistics records must be housed in some air-conditioned archives somewhere else in town. But I was wrong; the small outer office adjoined an equally small but windowless inner office in which resided large ledger books of births, marriages, and deaths back to 1866. The head clerk allowed me to do my own digging once I had identified myself as a historian. The research in Grenada had begun.

Success on the very first day! I knew Noel had been born about 1884, as he was 20 in December 1904, so I searched through the appropriate index of births, looking at St Patrick’s parish, assuming that he had grown up near Duquesne Estate. Sure enough, I found a listing for a male baby born to John C. and Mary J. Noel. The 1884 register itself filled in the details. Only the name, a most important piece of datum, was missing for all entries. But now I knew Clement’s father’s and mother’s names, and happily, his boyhood home, Duquesne.

I next found his death record in the same way, checking 1916 first, the year his name disappeared from the Grenada Handbook listing of dentists. He died on May 3, 1916, of asthenia related to pneumonia, in St George’s, as reported by Eldon Marksman and confirmed by his physician and the coroner. Many sickle cell anemia patients develop pneumonia or other respiratory complications as their body’s defense systems fail.

Wondering about his father’s cause of death as reported in Dr Herrick’s 1910 article—“by accident”—and now knowing his name, I searched the death register and found John Cornelius Noel’s entry. Turns out he died of kidney failure in 1886 at age 36, when Clement was just 2 years old. John Cornelius could quite conceivably have had SCD himself, but there is no way to document that. A search of the marriage indexes confirmed what I had already suspected. My first attempt/foray at research in a foreign country had gone quite well. I had learned a lot in just an hour or so. (I returned to the registry offices several times over the next few days to check birth and death dates of Clement’s relatives.)

Fully expecting the public library to be my home base and Mrs St Bernard my guide to the records, I felt at quite a loss when I returned to the library at midmorning only to be told she would not be in at all that day. I was on my own in Grenada. In my list of priority documents to see on this research trip, wills followed directly behind births and deaths. So I asked for directions to the Supreme Court registry and the name of the person in
charge of wills. A few up-hills and 10 minutes later, I presented my tired and sweaty self to a secretary at an old open-looking but solid building next to the National Parliament.

Wills were a long shot. I could think of few reasons why Clement Noel would have written a will at age 32 unless he were a wealthy man. His father too had died young, at age 36. I had no idea whether John Cornelius Noel had acquired enough property or possessions by that age to warrant writing a will. When tracing people who do not leave personal papers (correspondence, diaries, journals, financial ledgers, etc.), I have found that wills can serve as an entrée into these individuals’ lives. Such turned out to be the case with the Noels.

The woman whose name I had been given was busy at the moment, so I waited in a hot, busy room where several clerks, a few private citizens, and I were periodically cooled by the sweep of rotating overhead fans. In one corner a young, well-dressed lady talked animatedly with someone. I waited patiently for a few minutes, then noticed that this official-looking lady had stopped her conversation to address me. I stated my desire to look at some old wills and she directed me back downstairs to the clerk’s office. The head of that division told me I needed a stamp to search for wills, so I stepped over to a bank teller-type window and paid 50 cents (about US 20 cents) for the stamp. I then signed my name in a registry, stuck the stamp next to it on the page, and we were in business.

Within a few minutes, I had found references in the will indexes to both Walter Clement and John Cornelius Noel. Again, I was startled at my good fortune. The messenger who fetched materials from the storage area located Clement’s will with no difficulty. He brought it out and suddenly I was holding the very document Noel had written 72 years ago, at age 31, anticipating, for some reason, his death, which did in fact occur less than a year later. Based on what he distributed in his will, Clement Noel was not a man of wealth or property. His total estate was valued at £1100. He left all his dental equipment and office furnishings to his “boy” (office assistant) Eldon M. Marksman, the same person who reported his death to the authorities. Noel bequeathed to his mother, one of the executors of his estate, “all my household furniture, all moneys invested & all moneys to my credit in the Banks.”

To the other executor, Mr R. L. Ferguson of St Patrick’s Parish, he left his roll-top desk. Two half-sisters and a half-brother were to divide the proceeds of his outstanding accounts minus any debts owed. Perusing Noel’s will told me a little bit more about the man.

Locating Clement’s father’s will took more effort because of its age (1880s) and a clerk’s labeling error. In one of the busiest and best-known lawyers in St George’s Parish, identified herself as Denise Campbell, Supreme Court registrar, explained to him that an American black student at a white American dental school, I watched with fascination as she read quickly through Mary Justina’s will, nodding frequently and excitedly as she recognized names. Finally, she saw the name Cosmo St Bernard and said he had a law office just down the street. Literally racing to the phone, she dialed his number, identified herself as Denise Campbell, Supreme Court registrar, explained to him that an American researcher was seeking information on one of his relatives, a dentist named Walter Clement Noel, and asked if he had time to see me. At 3:30 PM, just 3.5 hours later, one of the busiest and best-known lawyers in St George’s and in Duquesne, St Patrick’s Parish, to many members of her large family. The language of the will and codicils gave numerous indications that she was the matriarch of the family, ruling it through her strong personality and her money. Despite all this evidence of strength, I realized as I read her will, Mary Justina also possessed at least 1 major flaw about which no one knew: she carried the sickle cell gene.

Having explained to the helpful wills lady—whose name and title I still did not know—my interest in learning as much as possible about Clement Noel, an early black student at a white American dental school, I watched with fascination as she read quickly through Mary Justina’s will, nodding frequently and excitedly as she recognized names. Finally, she saw the name Cosmo St Bernard and said he had a law office just down the street. Literally racing to the phone, she dialed his number, identified herself as Denise Campbell, Supreme Court registrar, explained to him that an American researcher was seeking information on one of his relatives, a dentist named Walter Clement Noel, and asked if he had time to see me. At 3:30 PM, just 3.5 hours later, one of the busiest and best-known lawyers in St George’s and I were carrying on an exciting discussion that continued intermittently for the next 5 days. My good fortune was holding up.

We sat in his second-story office that afternoon and talked about his family for almost 3 hours. (Cosmo was practicing—and still practices—in the law firm of Lewis and Renwick. Interestingly, the 2 men who witnessed Noel’s will in 1915 were barristers-at-law Felix Percival Renwick and John Renwick.) Cosmo’s mother, Edith Unice King, was Clement’s half-sister and one of the 2 sisters whom he had named in his will. Mary Justina King was Cosmo’s grandmother. He had been born on...
and still owned a piece of Duquesne Estate. (Cosmo produced a survey map showing ownerships of the now much-divided estate property.) Uncle Clement’s class picture from a Chicago dental school used to hang in the family home, Cosmo informed me, but had disappeared, along with an obituary notice from the local newspaper, perhaps burned in a house fire several years ago. Noel had practiced dentistry in a building Mary Justina owned in St George’s at the intersection of Young and Church streets, now (1987) called People’s Pharmacy. (I had, shortly before, while waiting for Mrs St Bernard, walked the half block from his office to the People’s Pharmacy and purchased a cold drink, not realizing, of course, the significance of the building to the story I was trying to piece together.)

Family tradition had it that Uncle Clement groomed and dressed himself well, was a sort of a dandy who enjoyed people and activities. He was dark skinned with kinky black hair, not too tall. Noel died young, developing pneumonia after driving to and from a race meeting (horse race) in Grenville one day and taking chill after bathing. Of Uncle Clement’s full siblings, only the older, Henry Cornelius Noel, reached adulthood, married, and had children. He died in 1940 in his mid-sixties, having been healthy most of his life. Clement’s sister Jane died in her mid-20s of tuberculosis in 1899, unmarried. No way to trace sickle cell in either of these people, though Jane may have had it.

Mary Justina was, as I had already inferred, the tough, strong-willed, matriarch of the family. She had inherited Duquesne Estate presumably from her father. Though intrigued by this lady, I felt it necessary to focus as much as possible on her son, the first sickle cell patient. To pursue Mary Justina’s story, fascinating though it undoubtedly is, would have led me too far astray for the short time I had to spend in Grenada.

Cosmo did fill me in a bit on the fate of Eldon Marksman, Noel’s office assistant and the man to whom he left his dental materials. Marksman went off to America to study dentistry but wound up attending and graduating from Howard University’s medical school, Washington, DC. He remained in the United States, practicing in Maryland until his death many years later, though, Cosmo said, making respectful visits to Noel’s half-sisters whenever he came to the island.

These are some of the pieces of information I learned from Cosmo St Bernard that afternoon. What astounded him and gave me credibility in his eyes was how much I knew about his family from my research that morning, even to producing copies of his uncle’s and grandmother’s wills, and the story I then told him of his Uncle Clement and the discovery of sickle cell anemia. I had brought copies of crucial documents, including Dr Herrick’s 1910 article; Noel’s Presbyterian Hospital chart; the map showing the location of Noel’s rooms, hospitals, dental school, and physician’s home in Chicago; Mary Justina’s 1904 letter and Dr Oliver Arthur’s letters to the dental school dean; Noel’s school record from Harrison College; and issues of the Grenada Handbook and dental school catalogue containing W. C. Noel’s name. We traded a lot of information in a short time.

And then he started making phone calls to people in his wide acquaintance whom he thought might be able to help us (it became kind of a joint project for a time) learn more about his uncle. Relatives confirmed that no pictures or personal papers remained of Dr Noel. But 2 elderly ladies who lived directly across the street from Cosmo’s office remembered hearing about the young dentist as they were growing up and knew someone whose tooth Noel had pulled. (When he dialed their phone number, I actually heard the phone ring across the street through the open windows and saw one of the ladies walk to the phone, pick it up, and begin talking.) We arranged to meet them the next morning. Cosmo also arranged a short meeting for the next day with Dr Alexis, the medical superintendent of the hospital, who had an interest in sickle cell anemia, and, it turned out, was also a descendant on the King side of the family. Other phone calls then and over the next few days gave us no further leads but did make me rest easier that I had not missed any important angles. Cosmo spoke to several elderly people who might have remembered Clement Noel and even with Eldon Marksman’s brother. I sat there and silently hoped that Cosmo had inherited his strong character, charm, and personality from his Uncle Clement (and reports indicate he may well have).

The sickle cell angle did not bother Cosmo a bit. Though members of the family may now be carriers of the gene, none that he knew of had suffered from SCD. And though Mary Justina had carried the gene, her second husband, Samuel O’Connell King, must not have. On the Noel side, only Clement’s brother Henry bore children, one of whom, George Noel, had died recently after leading a vigorous life. We could not locate any of George Noel’s children to learn more of that family’s health picture. It is possible, then, that sickle cell affected some Noel descendents. But Cosmo had no reservations about my stating Walter Clement Noel’s name in print as the first documented sickle cell patient in Western medical literature. In fact, he and all subsequent family members with whom Cosmo or I spoke felt pride at being associated with such an interesting medical “first.”

As we concluded our first meeting, afternoon had turned to early evening. Cosmo’s offer of a drink felt like an appropriate way to part, so we toasted each other with a local fruit-flavored rum from his own cabinet. I needed a beer chaser. Dinner that night with my wife at the hotel was the best I think I’ve ever had.

Having spent a few hours Monday night studying the various Noel/King wills and constructing a family tree, I returned for a short time Tuesday morning to the vital
statistics registry office for more birth and death dates. Then promptly at 10:00 I appeared at the building across from Cosmo’s office. A friendly-sounding gray-haired lady called down from a second-story window, inquiring if I had come to speak with her. Seeing my nod, she instructed me to enter through the gate. Marjorie MacLeish and Katherine Hughes ushered me into their home with warm smiles. I felt immediately comfortable. We spent an hour around a table in their living room with a tape recorder running.

Both women had grown up on estates near Duquesne and had attended church with the King family. They had known Mary Justina, but only as children would know a rather formidable adult. And both were too young at the time to remember Clement Noel. But Ms MacLeish’s father’s younger sister had known him, they informed me. She had had a tooth pulled by him. So they brought out Aunt Enid, then in her 90s, to tell her story. She was a 16-year-old student at the convent school in St George’s when she developed a toothache. Because young women could not leave the school and walk alone in town, someone had to accompany her down the street the short distance to Noel’s dental office. Noel saw patients on the first floor and lived on the second. Aunt Enid remembered Clement Noel as a healthy looking, well-dressed, plump man with dark coffee-colored skin, “a round, fat face, and a good body.” No one I had met recalled him as an unhealthy man. She liked him.

And I liked all 3 of these open, accommodating women. We sat talking, occasionally looking out over St George’s harbor and lagoon. Cosmo joined us after a while and reminisced with the ladies. After drinking a glass of apple juice I left to meet Dr Alexis at the hospital.

Clearly, he was a busy man. I waited a while for him, spoke with him for less than 5 minutes, then followed his directions to the hospital laboratory, where I was to meet the head of that department, Agatha Clarke. More waiting. I became impatient because I had more research to do that day. This meeting felt more like a courtesy call and less like a formal interview, so I didn’t press the issue. Instead, I continued with my plan.

Mrs Clarke finally appeared, looking as though she had been hurrying all morning. I started to tell her the sickle cell story I had so far reconstructed and could tell she was fascinated. “Another first for Grenada,” she remarked at one point. Shortly after we began, however, she stood up, said something I couldn’t hear, and walked toward the door. Misinterpreting her meaning, I quickly gathered together my sickle cell documents and followed her. She stopped me and said to wait there in the lab; she’d return shortly. I stood there alone, restless and wondering again, for 10 minutes or so. When Mrs Clarke returned, her manner again seemed abrupt. She asked me under whose authority was I was carrying out the research. Did the Grenada government know I was doing this? Had I gotten permission to do this? Who was funding it? I explained, rather defensively, that I was using public documents and that the project was my own. I could not understand her changed manner and odd questions. She informed me that she had gone out to call the hospital administrator and that he would like to see me now. So we marched to his office, I quite mystified.

He greeted me cordially, introduced me to a hospital steward who stood throughout our conversation, invited me and Mrs Clarke to sit down and then had me tell all three of them the nature of my project for the next hour. They asked questions, offered suggestions, told me about current sickle cell problems on the island, and listened to my story. At the end, Mrs Clarke asked if I could, after I had published the story, try to find a way to shunt some American dollars to Grenada for a much-needed sickle cell screening program on the island. I promised I would do what I could. We shook hands and parted, Mrs Clarke asking me to call her on Friday, as she was going to check out some ideas she had about following Clement Noel’s trail. It had been a friendly visit, as open as all the others during my stay.

The one major task remaining on my high-priority list was local newspaper research. I was anxious to read Noel’s obituary and to see if he had made news during his lifetime or advertised his practice. Once more I returned to the public library and once more I found Mrs St Bernard not present. Nor was the archivist. Another librarian opened the National Archives room (air conditioned), however, and we hunted for the appropriate newspapers—in vain. He told me to return in an hour, when the archivist would surely be back. I killed the hour back at the birth and death registry, then returned to have my worst fears confirmed. No Grenada newspapers remained for that time period. I was shattered because I had already checked newspaper indexes at the Library of Congress in Washington and knew that Grenada newspapers were preserved nowhere else in the world. So I’d never see that obituary. Cosmo remembers reading it as a youngster. I dropped back over to Cosmo’s office to review my day’s activities and plan tomorrow’s. He shared my disappointment about the newspapers but buoyed my spirits by making a few phone calls to people out in the country who might have known Noel. The next morning, I rented a car and headed for Duquesne.

Grenada had no superhighways (and still does not). The best road on the island was the one across the central mountains connecting Grenville, home of the old Pearls International Airport, where all aircraft used to land and depart, and St George’s. My route to Duquesne took me over the worst “paved” roads I have ever driven. The whole road system was under reconstruction, but those repairs only made travel worse for me. No road in Grenada seemed to run straight for more than 100 yards, and there were precious few stretches like that. Most
twisted and turned restlessly along the coast and up into the magnificent mountains and bush. American-sized cars of the 1980s would never have made it in Grenada, for the roads were too narrow. Two small Japanese-made cars could barely squeeze past each other on most roads. Trucks posed real problems to the faint at heart. My New York City upbringing and driving habits definitely helped in Grenada.

When I left Wednesday morning for the country, I actually held out little hope of finding Duquesne. Cosmo and others had warned me that the estate had been broken up into small parcels and that little remained of the original buildings. I knew that Mary Justina had left land in her will for a chapel, and I hoped to see that building, though it postdated Clement’s time. My goals for the day were to stop briefly in the Duquesne area (the official Grenada road map marked out an area called Duquesne) to get a sense of the Grenada that Noel knew as a boy and to interview, thanks to Cosmo, 3 women (family name Red Head) in their 90s from Sauteurs who might have remembered or known something about their neighbor Clement Noel. These modest goals, it turned out, were far exceeded that day.

The Grenada government had chosen not to erect signs on its roads. I could only guess at where I was by counting towns and major landmarks and comparing them to my map. Because I had never driven a car on the “wrong” side of the road (British system), shifted gears with my left hand, or contended with such narrow, sharply curved roads before, I had little opportunity to consult the map. I marveled at the rugged beauty of Grenada from the car (there were literally no turnoffs or wide spots in the road), moving at very leisurely speeds (the limits were 15 miles per hour in town and 30 miles per hour in the country). Cars tooted and passed me regularly, much to my relief. Tailgaters were mercifully infrequent. So when I reached what felt like Duquesne area, I cautiously pulled off the road near a house and asked the women on the porch for the chapel. I had passed it. Gingerly, I turned the car around and tried to follow their instructions—unsuccessfully. I had passed it again, 3 road laborers informed me, and they redirected me. Once more, I searched for the turnoff, crawling along the road. This time I did it correctly.

We (the car and I) crossed a 1-lane bridge over the little Duquesne River, passed some children playing on its rocks and then an older-looking farmer walking with a boy and leading a mule. A few yards later, I turned left and faced Duquesne Chapel.

I wasn’t sure what to do next. The road I had just left seemed like a private street and I had no idea where it led. My intention at that moment was to look at the chapel for a few minutes, then drive on up to Sauteurs. I turned around and saw the man, mule, and boy approaching. He asked if he could help. I explained I was a historian from the United States seeking information about a family from the area. He knew a lot about the chapel and soon revealed that his grandmother had donated the land for it. I couldn’t believe my luck again. I was carrying on a conversation with Philip Alexis, Cosmo’s cousin, who lived on, and whose wife Patrice managed, what remained of the family holdings at Duquesne. I whipped out the tape recorder and we sat down on some concrete remains facing the chapel to talk.

Mary Justina’s parents, he thought, came from the island of Dominica to Sauteurs and built up land holdings by trading sugar and purchasing small land tracts with the profits. Philip never knew Clement (he wasn’t born until 1921) but he had heard of him. He recalled that Mary Justina felt strongly about educating her children and so willingly sent Clement to Chicago to dental school. He confirmed much of what I had already learned in St George’s. But he also helped give me a picture of Clement Noel’s early life. We walked up to the home Mary Justina had built for her daughter (Philip’s mother), Mary Ethelena King (Alexis). It was never finished, but Philip and Patrice had been living in it for years. The plantation grew cocoa, plantains, nutmeg, bananas, mangoes, coconuts, and other tropical fruits—some of which I got to sample.

My day with Philip Alexis turned up a few new pieces of information about Walter Clement Noel. And I made new friends in Philip and Patrice. She was, in her own words, a “bush woman,” not interested particularly in traditional domestic pursuits. This attitude showed in the way they lived. Their home was not electrified and was falling apart in places. The huge house contained few furnishings besides beds, dressers, tables and chairs, and kitchen essentials. The wood floors had several holes exposing the ground floor to the earth below. But the Alexises got along quite well. Their main pursuit seemed to be raising crops, which Patrice managed from beginning to end. She oversaw the workers, the estate, the house, the garden, etc. In fact, the government had recently named her “female farmer of the month.” A tough looking 63-year-old woman with dark coffee skin and sparkling piercing eyes, Patrice softened quickly as we stood on the porch and read together aloud Dr Herrick’s 1910 description of Walter Clement Noel. She and Philip were fascinated by the story I related of their relative.

Philip told me, when we stood at the Duquesne Chapel, that they possessed a picture of Mary Justina. One of the first things we did when we got to his home was walk into the entranceway and look at the photo. She was a beautiful, strong-looking woman. We took the picture off the wall and put it against a pillar on the porch. Before I photographed it, Philip and Patrice insisted on dusting it and shining it up. Doing that really made a difference. Mary Justina looked like proprietress of all she surveyed. I wondered if Clement had inherited some of that toughness.

Philip changed into nicer clothes and spent the day...
with me in Sauteurs. Before leaving, we gathered on the porch with his son, grandson, and others, and drank fresh coconut juice. Then Philip took me around to the side of the house, where stood the foundation of the original plantation house in which Clement had grown up. He posed for me, standing on the steps of that house. I imagined young Clement having free reign of the grounds, looking at the mountain vistas, roaming through the fields, eating the fruits and vegetables grown there, playing in the Duquesne River, watching the mill operate. And in Sauteurs, a quiet town overlooking the Caribbean, with the rocks of the island of Carriacou rising magnificently in the distance, we stopped at the Catholic church he had attended. Again, I tried to imagine him as a boy sitting in his pew praying or fidgeting, and then going outside and playing with other boys afterwards. Behind the church, on the bluff over the ocean, sits the cemetery. Philip pointed to the gravestone of John Cornelius Noel, easily discernible by its clearly preserved inscription. Next to it stood another stone almost impossible to read. We got right up to it and saw the name: Walter Clement Noel. He and his sister Jane, who died of tuberculosis, share the grave and stone. So there he was. I had finally caught up with Walter Clement Noel, the first recorded sickle cell patient in Western medicine. Those visits to Duquesne and Sauteurs were both the high point and climax of my research into Noel. The interviews with the 3 Red Head ladies turned up nothing. They had heard of and knew the family but had no personal knowledge of Clement. The same was true of another nonagenarian we had stopped to talk with on the way to Sauteurs. Upon our return to Prospect that late afternoon, Patrice made tea and served fresh vegetables, plantains, and blogo. They loaded me up with fresh fruits to take back to the hotel and share with my wife. One of the first things we did when I arrived back at the hotel that evening was eat a Duquesne mango and think of Walter Clement Noel.

**EPILOGUE**

On Wednesday night, June 23, 2010, American Airlines flight 2171 from Miami touched down hard and unexpectedly in the fog (none of the passengers could see how close to the ground the plane was) at Maurice Bishop International Airport in St George’s, Grenada. Twenty-seven years (less one month) after conducting my historical sleuthing on the island, I was returning to tell that story on the 100th anniversary (less 5 months) of the published description of Noel’s sickle cell anemia case. On this trip I was not so anonymous. Another speaker at the Caribbean-wide sickle cell conference, Dr Kwaku Ohene-Frempong from Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, spotted me as we waited to clear customs, and the 2 of us were met outside the terminal by Jean Griffiths of the Sickle Cell Association of Grenada. She drove us to our rooms at the University Club, a facility owned by the St George’s University School of Medicine that is usually reserved for visiting faculty. I was a guest on the island this time, ready to return the favor Grenadians had given to me in 1987, when they helped me do my research.

In part, I had already returned the favor. I (with Dr Goldberg) had authored an article published in 1989 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* presenting the results of my research in Chicago, Washington, DC, and Grenada. The folks who had helped me perform that research had received reprints of the article, but I wasn’t so sure many other people in Grenada knew of the distinction their land held as the home of the first SCD patient recorded in the medical literature. Now, during this trip to Grenada, I would have the opportunity to tell Noel’s story at the dedication of a plaque at the Sauteurs cemetery in which he is buried, and again more fully at the SCD conference at the St George’s medical school.

The story I came to tell was broader than even I had expected when I completed the research and writing back in the ’80s. By some confluence of cosmic forces, I had, as a graduate student at the University of Virginia during the early 1970s, come across one of the University of Virginia hospital admission book entries for the second SCD patient recorded in the medical literature: Ellen Anthony of Lynch Station, Virginia. I decided, after my success in tracking down information about the first sickle cell case, to do the same for the second. What I learned from that research was that the contrast between the 2 cases could not have been greater. Told together, the 2 stories, ostensibly about doctors and patients and medical discovery, illustrated also the racial situation in early 20th-century America.

Though the SCD conference was not scheduled to take place until Friday the 25th, delegates representing sickle cell programs from around the Caribbean had arrived on Wednesday, a day early, for a special reason. On Thursday morning, about 30 of us met outside one of the hotels near the Grand Anse, the beach and main tourist area of St George’s, and boarded a small bus. Our destination was the cemetery behind the Catholic church in Sauteurs, overlooking the Caribbean, where Walter Clement Noel and his family were buried.

We navigated the same roads I had driven in my rented left-handed, stick-shift car in 1987. To me, they were still as narrow, bumpy, and hilly as before. This time, however, I didn’t care—someone else was driving. As we neared the town, I noticed some butterflies flitting around in my belly; I hadn’t realized until then how much this visit to Noel’s grave meant to me.

When we arrived, I was surprised to see several reporters and camera people and a priest wearing a white cassock over his black shirt, slacks, and clerical collar. This was going to be more of an occasion than I had expected. The organizers wanted folks in Grenada to know Noel’s story and its significance to their island.

Once we had stretched a bit from our long ride, the
group gathered at the cemetery entrance, where the priest offered a prayer and some words to commemorate the event. Then, Miss Gloria St Bernard, Cosmo’s sister and so also a descendant of Walter Clement Noel, unveiled a plaque that read:

In this cemetery lie
the remains of
WALTER CLEMENT NOEL
Born: 21 June 1884
Died: 3 May 1916
The 1st recorded case of
Sickle cell disorder

I stood there and smiled and got a little teary. But I was also proud. We all could stand there at Noel’s grave and honor him—in other words, we knew whose grave to visit because a historian—me!—had researched—in Chicago; Washington, DC; and Grenada—and told this man’s story to the world. Pretty neat.

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