

# STANDARD DEVIATIONS: Who is Eunice Rivers?

## Part 3

Greetings,

Eunice Verdell Rivers was born November 12, 1899. Early County, Georgia. She was eldest of three daughters. Her father was a sharecropper and sawmill worker. Her mother passed away when Eunice was fifteen.

Rivers was sent to a mission boarding school at fourteen(?) and transferred to the Tuskegee Institute for upper grades, in 1918.

Her training in nursing allowed her to work with the Institute's "Moveable School". Her work was in basic nutrition and hygiene for rural black midwifery.



{The Tuskegee Movable School. George Washington Carver Museum, NPS}

One of four Black public health nurses in the entire state, she also worked for the state's Bureau of Vital Statistics and devised techniques for midwives to report births accurately.

Her position was defunded in state cutbacks of the Great Depression, in 1931, and she worked nights at the Tuskegee John A. Andrew Hospital, a hospital that treated Blacks.

The syphilis study was originated in '32 and Rivers was given the position as "scientific assistant". For the next forty years her job was to find men for the study, follow-up on their condition; assist in their examinations, provide aspirin and tonics; and gain agreement from their families for autopsies.



Nurse Rivers worked forty years on one clinical study of 600 Black men. The study followed syphilis disease progression without medical intervention until death and post-mortem exam. Her duties revolved mostly around transporting study participants to the Institute, distribution of aspirin and mineral supplement placebos, and acting as liaison between the physician and patient.



{Study participants received aspirin and placebo for their syphilis from Nurse Rivers.}

Rivers was the only official involved with the study for its entire duration. She retired in 1965 but continued participating in public health until 1975.

During her time with the study she also worked in maternal and child health clinics, taught in the nursing program, volunteered with the Red Cross and was active in church service. She married a Tuskegee co-worker in 1952, and died in August, 1986.

Mrs. Laurie, her married name, was recipient of several nursing awards and honors, most notably the Oveta Culp Hobby Award and Distinguished Service Award from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Is that it? Is it enough to state the dates and deeds of a life in order to understand that life?

I wonder.

Because a life in context can reveal hidden dimensions that provide greater insight and appreciation.



Jim Crow laws enacted throughout the South controlled the lives of the poor Black. Jim Crow lasted over six decades. It dominated the narrative of Eunice Rivers' life. We can't understand her life without that context.

Eunice Rivers was an African American born in the deep South, notorious for its poverty, racism, and in a county with the highest lynching per capita in the state. She was the eldest living child; two older siblings had died in infancy prior to her birth. She was born just 34 years after the end of a civil war in a region reeling economically, seething in resentment, and hellbent on retaining supremacy over the Negro.

Eunice was sent to a relative's church mission school where, "Yankees came down and had these schools for Negroes. ... I guess I was fourteen, twelve, or thirteen years old."

The white teachers in the mission school did not instruct Blacks in higher education. Higher learning was almost non-existent for Blacks. Males were expected to become farm labor and females were only given basic instruction in service-related skills. She attained a fourth-grade level education.

Rivers went to Tuskegee because The Tuskegee Institute was the only option within reach, and it was only the benefit of her missionary school education that allowed her to stand out from the other females. Women attending Tuskegee typically learned "handicrafts" like making baskets from pine needles and cotton-stuffing mattresses.

Her nurse training involved sitting with dying patients, cleaning the bodies and transporting the corpse to the morgue. "We did not take blood, but we took care of the patient's personal hygiene." **Education of the Black nurse had no real comparison to what Whites were trained and allowed to perform.** Any health care for Blacks was almost non-existent.

Rivers went with the Tuskegee "Movable School" where she taught midwives basic hygiene, "how to prepare the bed for the delivery, because at that time most of the women had the babies on the floor."

Depression era cutbacks, in 1931, forced her back to the Institute's free clinic, where she provided well-baby care through county health services.

When a study of syphilis in the Negro was developed, white, Washington, Yankee doctors needed someone who had the trust of the community to interface for them. White doctors simply did not treat or interact with the black race. Her rudimentary skills in health care, her exposure to the local Black population through the Movable School and her race were the only qualifications for joining the study. A Black liaison was required to find and recruit volunteers, and to be the go-between for the white researchers and Black participants.

The original work was slated to last just six months. Was she expected to be more than a means to reach the Black men needed to enroll? What, exactly, was the role of Eunice Rivers in the study?

When the Great Depression ravaged the economy, the study changed. The cost of caring for the patients was too high to finish the protocol (remember that this is pre-penicillin and the arsenic



compounds had long courses with horrible side-effects). But these men were not seen as human patients; they were study subjects. And as Black, they were understood to be a lesser species altogether. However we see it today, the study simply watched as these men suffered disease and died. The value of their suffering came after postmortem examination and not before.

Doctors in the study came from Washington to Macon County, AL, “not every year, but about every two years” at first. Spending no more than a couple weeks during the slack periods between planting and harvesting. The visits were routine physical exams and repeat syphilis testing. Then the investigators returned to Washington where a new group of doctors would later repeat the process. But these random and infrequent exams were the only time these men ever saw a medical professional; and they were the only poor Black to receive any real health care at all.

For forty years Eunice Rivers ferried participants to the Tuskegee hospital for exams. She handed out aspirin and mineral supplements. She did not practice any care in the real sense of nursing.



{Penicillin was never provided. Rivers dispensed only aspirin and mineral supplements to men with latent syphilis.}

In her capacity as nurse, chauffeur, and interpreter, Rivers enjoyed a celebrity-level status among the population. She was the only link between White power and Black poverty. This gave her an elite position in the community, a bridge over a wide chasm of racial divide.





{White doctors came from Washington for annual visits, a couple weeks each year.}

Her popularity and respect as envoy of white medical attention gave her the power to persuade the families of study patients to give permission for autopsy. The bargain entailed compensation of funeral expenses for the autopsy permit. Burial costs were so prohibitive an expense that Rivers made the deal for hundreds of the men.

When the study's true intentions, practices, and consequence were revealed in its explosive 1972 whistleblower reveal, Rivers went silent. Only one oral history has been recorded in testimony to her life's work. She never interviewed or answered direct questions about the study or her role. Her memories are not recorded for the period of years when penicillin, an effective cure, was first introduced, and the subsequent twenty-plus years those men were deceived, and their care withheld.

The awards and certificates given to Eunice Rivers are all merely testaments to the tenure of her service, recognitions of years of fealty to a study which she ultimately understood to be in opposition to the well-being of her neighbors and the men who did not comprehend their involvement, or hers.

Eunice Rivers was born into a world still smoldering from war; born into a race targeted by prejudice and discrimination, in a part of the country in denial of equality and opportunity.

She attained a level of learning that few in her position could realize. And still, the racial divisions existed. Her work was restricted to a level of service that we don't really think of as nursing in a modern sense, but more of an enabler of a misguided and racially motivated scientific atrocity.



She worked for the “Washington”, “Yankee” doctors **not as a nurse**, but as a servant to their needs. They required an insider to access the Blacks and maintain their trust. Eunice Rivers embodied the needed Black person associated with the Tuskegee hospital, mindful of the supremacy of White medical understanding, and subservient to that paradigm.



{Rivers' role as a clinical nurse is suspect.}

**Who is Eunice Rivers?** Nurse Eunice Rivers Laurie was a Black public health nurse in the rural South who helped administer one of the most notorious and unethical medical studies ever undertaken by and within the United States. Victim, villain, or simply a tool of medical malfeasance? I'll let you make up your own minds. The simple truth is that she is unquestionably an American Black woman whose story reflects our disturbing and ongoing history, a story that needs to be understood by everyone in health care that believes they serve the ill and infirm.

Have a great week and be safe,

Bryan

