

—THE FIRST AFRICAN DOCTORS—
WEST AFRICA MEDICAL SERVICE OF THE BRITISH ARMY

Dr. James Africanus Horton



The West Africa Medical Service of the British Army primarily served health needs of the British Army, but was also allowed to do some private practice among non-official British and African Communities.

There was high mortality and morbidity among the Europeans (including troops and doctors) in the Gold Coast and other West African settlements. The British decided to train British subjects of African descent as doctors because they would be able to stand the tropical climate and diseases better. The first two beneficiaries were Drs Africanus Horton and Broughton Davies.

In 1855 Dr. James Africanus Horton and Dr. William Broughton Davies were selected to train as doctors and were the first African medical officers to serve in the West African Medical Service of the British Army.

They were commissioned as staff assistant surgeons in 1859 for “duties only in West Africa” and were posted to the Gold Coast.

In 1866, Dr. Horton published his “Physical and Medical Climate and Meteorology of the West Coast of Africa”. He described diseases associated with the cold season (Harmattan) as “the worst form of gout and rheumatism with flying pains all over the body, swollen joints, intense local pains.” This must have been a description of sickle cell disease.