

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Walter L. Williams, Cornell's Only Non-Credentialed Veterinary Faculty

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
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It took Walter L. Williams 40 years to get a steady job.

In the years between growing up on a farm and attending a one-room school in Illinois to becoming an inaugural faculty at Cornell's veterinary college in 1896, Williams attended a Presbyterian seminary, the Illinois Industrial University (now the University of Illinois) and the Montreal Veterinary College in Canada. His principal instructors were a veterinarian from London's Royal Veterinary College (while in Illinois) and, in Montreal, a physician who was just seven years his senior. Though he had taken several veterinary courses in the agricultural college in Champaign-Urbana, his total veterinary college exposure was a single six-month session at Montreal.<sup>1</sup>

Because Williams never completed any single course of study, he never earned a diploma or degree of any sort. His sole award of merit (from Montreal) was a medal that according to Cornell lore, his children used as a teething ring.



*Walter L. Williams*  
(© Cornell University)

Following his short stint in Montreal, Williams practiced rural veterinary medicine in Indiana, and held positions at Purdue University and Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman. While there, he received an invitation from Louis A. Merillat, the founder of the McKillip Veterinary College in Chicago, to teach at that college. When negotiations broke down, Merillat invited Williams to apply for the position as dean but that offer, also, was not consummated.

Instead, Williams went east to Ithaca, NY, where he became one of the six founding faculty of the new veterinary college at Cornell University under the leadership of James Law. Professor Law determined that a clinician (in addition to himself) was needed to complement the histologist, physiologist, pathologist and anatomist already assembled. Just a couple of months before the college was to open with a class of 11 students, he invited Williams to travel to Ithaca for an interview. Williams subsequently became the sixth faculty member to be recruited for the fledgling college.



*Walter Williams (upper left) and the other founding faculty of the New York State Veterinary College*  
(© Cornell University)

Though he never held a veterinary degree, Williams was an able clinician. He also had a scientific mind having been educated in the basic sciences by none other than William Osler, who would go on to become one of the founding faculty at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the leading physician of his generation.

The lack of formal credentials, noteworthy even at this early stage in veterinary education, did not diminish the wisdom shown by James Law in recruiting Williams to be one of Cornell's founding faculty. For the fledgling university to reach all the way across the country for a Chair of Surgery must have seemed ironic to some people, however, because shortly after his appointment was announced, an acquaintance of Williams is said to have remarked, "Well that

is from the sublime to the ridiculous, for Cornell University to come to Montana for a professor.”

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard, Ellis P. *A Cornell Heritage: Veterinary Medicine 1868-1908*. (Ithaca, New York, New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, 1979) 190-8. This citation applies to quotations and information throughout this story.

**KEYWORDS:**

Walter L. Williams  
Cornell University  
James Law  
McKillip Veterinary College  
Purdue University  
University of Illinois  
Montreal Veterinary College  
William Osler

**TOPIC:**

Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

**LEADING QUESTION:**

What distinguished veterinarian and member of Cornell’s veterinary faculty did not hold a degree?

**META-SUMMARY:**

Walter L. Williams, one of the most distinguished members of the Cornell faculty, never held a degree.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.