

Public Health History

As we continue to learn about the history of public health in Florida, there are so many events to share. In this issue, we have two. One special one was the Florida's first College of Public Health. Until that time, if you wanted an MPH, you had to leave the state and go elsewhere. Here is an article on how we got that college and a link to much more of the historical information right up to current happenings. Be sure to go there as the pictures include some great FPFA friends.

An Idea Whose Time Had Come: Florida's First College of Public Health

"USF was chosen as the place for Florida's College of Public Health," Dr. Peter Levin wrote in 1984, "because of the broad base of knowledge found in the many colleges of the University and the unique Tampa location." Levin, the college's first dean, expounded further, noting that not only faculty from the colleges of medicine and nursing, but from business, education, engineering, natural sciences and social sciences were "key to the development of the college."

Three decades of growth and innumerable success stories later, former Fla. Rep. Samuel P. Bell III shed more light on the founding of COPH.

Like many created entities of any kind, it all started with one person's idea and another person's decision to act on it. The idea person was Robert Hamlin, a graduate of the Harvard University College of Public Health. He brought his idea to Bell, dubbed "the godfather of the college" by Charles Mahan, another founder who was COPH dean from 1995 to 2002.

"He had retired to Florida and realized that there was not a college of public health in Florida," Bell recalled of Hamlin. "He contacted my staff director, John Phelps, with the idea, and John and I discussed the idea and decided that we should pursue the project. When we began the effort, we discovered that there had not been a college of a public health created anywhere in the country for more than 20 years, and most emphasis was on clinical health.

"As a member of the Florida Legislature, I could see the results of public health problems – mental health issues, alcoholism, child abuse, heart attack and stroke brought on by lack of exercise and obesity, infant mortality, etc. – yet there was no focus to address these issues. In addition," Bell said, "there was a shortage of trained public health workers as problems grew and population increased."

Where to establish the college as a physical entity turned out to be fairly obvious. Logic dictated that the state's first college of public health had to be part of a public university that had a medical school and was located in an urban area, and USF was the only institution in the state that met all three requirements.

"There was no bill," Bell said of the necessary legislative action that followed. "The college was first created by a line item in the state appropriation. Of course, we had to work the proposal through the Board of Regents and the USF administration." All of it moved with surprising quickness and ease, he said, underscoring an idea whose time had come. Naturally, it didn't hurt that its biggest proponent was in prime position to do it the most good.

"The College's success must first recognize the man who made it all possible," said Dr. Heather Stockwell, the first faculty hire in the college's Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics. "Without Sam Bell," she said, "there would be no COPH. Before our college was formed, there were no schools of public health in Florida. It was through the vision and leadership of Sam Bell that our college was formed and its funding secured in its early years so that it could grow and develop into the College we are all so proud of today!" "Sam Bell was absolutely committed to the idea that there needed to be a strong college of public health in this state," Dr. Martha Coulter agreed. "He single-handedly got absolute support for us from the state legislature, so that we were not dependent completely on federal funds and training grants."

“There was not much opposition to the effort,” Bell said. “It really flew under the radar. I was in leadership during all of this time and was chair of the appropriations committee in the House for the years 1985 through 1988, for four sessions. Before that, I had chaired the rules committee and was majority leader, so I was in a position to get support. After the College was initially approved, I was able to guide funding.”

If founding the college had seemed relatively easy, running it in the early days was not. Being the only college of public health in Florida created a heavy work load at the same time it underscored the demand for what a college of public health delivers.

To learn “the rest of the story” about the history of the College of Public Health, right up to today’s activities, go to this link: <http://hscweb3.hsc.usf.edu/health/publichealth/news/idea-whose-time-come-floridas-first-college-public-health/>



125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida Exhibition in the Historic Capitol Museum

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.



The Opening Ceremony for the 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida Exhibition was held in the Historic Capitol Museum in Tallahassee on September 30, 2014. This outstanding public health exhibition chronicles the history of public health in Florida since the creation of the State Board of Health in 1889. It is most fitting that this public health exhibition is displayed in Florida’s Historic Capitol, which was built starting in 1845. It is in this building that the Florida House of Representatives and Florida Senate approved the legislative act creating the State Board of Health, which was signed into law by Governor Francis Fleming on February 20, 1889.

The whole Historic Capitol is now a museum. The 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida Exhibition is in a large room on the entrance level of the Historic Capitol Museum. The Opening Ceremony for the exhibition was conducted on the floor above in the old Senate Chamber. During the Opening Ceremony, Tiffany Baker, the Interim Director of the Historic Capitol Museum and Director of the Florida Legislative Research Center, welcomed everyone to this great event. Ms. Baker was followed by David Mica, Chair of the Historic Capitol Museum Foundation, who spoke about the importance of this public health history exhibition. Then State Surgeon General, John H. Armstrong, M.D. gave a comprehensive overview of the historical significance of public health to the development of Florida. In his remarks, Dr. Armstrong recognized descendants in attendance of Florida's first State Health Officer, Dr. Joseph Yates Porter, and Governor Francis Fleming.



Subsequently on October 17, the first Curator's Tour of the 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida Exhibition was held for visitors to the Historic Capitol Museum. I was honored as the Historian for the Florida Public Health Association to be invited to serve as a guest speaker on this tour, which was led by Lisa Barton, Exhibits Manager for the Historic Capitol Museum. I was asked to start the tour at the first public health exhibits by talking about yellow fever and the three persons who were most responsible for the creation of the State Board of Health in 1889: John P. Wall, M.D., Joseph Yates Porter, M.D., and Governor Francis Fleming. It is interesting to note that these three men were contemporaries of each other, that they all suffered the loss of loved ones to yellow fever, and importantly they were in key positions that enabled them to combat this deadly disease through their leadership and advocacy for the creation by the Legislature of Florida's first state health department.

Dr. John Wall, known as the Father of the State Board of Health, was born in a covered wagon to planter parents from Georgia migrating to Florida in Hamilton County near present day Jasper and Live Oak in 1836. Francis Fleming, whose grandfather from Ireland received a land grant on the St. Johns River in north Florida in the late 18th century from Spain for his military service in Spanish East Florida, was born in the Jacksonville area in 1841. Dr. Porter, who would become Florida's first State Health Officer and whose father was a merchant from South Carolina and his mother a member of the prominent Randolph family of Virginia, was born in Key West in 1847. So they were close in age and their paths would ultimately come together for the great benefit of their generation and those that would follow in Florida.

After treating a cabin boy with yellow fever on a ship in Tampa Bay, Dr. Wall lost his wife and 14 month old daughter to yellow fever. Dr. Porter's grandfather, a captain in the United States Navy, died of yellow fever, and just before he was born, Dr. Porter's father succumbed to the same disease. Francis Fleming, whose campaign for Governor was seriously impeded by travel restrictions because of yellow fever, personally experienced this disease's ravages with the loss of his brother in the Jacksonville yellow fever epidemic of 1888.



Dr. Porter, who had survived yellow fever and become immune to it as a medical student interning with a retired Army surgeon, received his doctor of medicine degree from the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1870. That same year he became a surgeon in the United States Army assigned to Fort Jefferson, just 70 miles west of Key West in the Dry Tortugas, where he benefitted from the notes left there on treating yellow fever victims by Fort Jefferson's most renowned prisoner, Dr. Samuel Mudd of Lincoln assassination fame. In 1871 Francis Fleming, who had studied law after the Civil War and become a Jacksonville lawyer, married Lydia Pearson, the daughter of a Florida Supreme Court justice. That same year of 1871 in Tampa, Dr. Wall, who had received his medical degree from the Medical College of South Carolina in 1858 and served as a surgeon at the Confederate Hospital in Richmond during the Civil War, treated the cabin boy with yellow fever and tragically lost his wife and daughter to the disease. This loss of his closest of loved ones drove Dr. Wall over the next 18 years of his life to vigorously seek the establishment of the Florida State Board of Health.

In search of this noble quest, Dr. Wall went to the second meeting of the Florida Medical Association (FMA) in 1875 in Jacksonville where he had an immediate impact. He was elected the FMA's second vice president, a delegate to the American Medical Association, and chair of the Committee to Establish the State Board of Health. Dr. Wall lobbied the Legislature, whose membership at first thought it would cost too much and no doubt had concerns even back then about giving too much power to state government. So Dr. Wall as the 1884 President of the FMA and a legislative representative from Hillsborough County got himself elected as a delegate from Hillsborough County to the state's Constitutional Convention of 1885, and singlehandedly got the provision for the State Board of Health into Florida's Constitution. To Dr. Wall's complete frustration, however, the Legislature still would not pass a law to create and fund the State Board of Health



In the meantime, Dr. Porter was transferred from Fort Jefferson to Texas, where several years later a physical indicating he had a heart condition led him to be placed on permanent sick leave. Returning to his family home in Key West, and while still officially in the Army, Dr. Porter became the chairman of the Monroe County Board of Health coordinating that city's battle against its yellow fever epidemic in 1887. He also assisted Tampa with its yellow fever epidemic that year

Coincidentally he was visiting Jacksonville the following summer and was asked by a physician colleague to examine his patient, who Dr. Porter diagnosed as having yellow fever. This was the first patient so diagnosed in the Jacksonville epidemic that would lead to the establishment of the State Board of Health. After returning to Key West, Dr. Porter was implored by the City of Jacksonville to return to lead and coordinate the battle against the epidemic there. Dr. Porter helped to bring calm to the panic stricken city and used his immunity to the disease and his experience in treating victims with comfort and the medical knowledge of the day. Not knowing the source of the disease was the mosquito, nevertheless with the onset of winter and its freezes, the epidemic subsided, and a grateful Jacksonville presented Dr. Porter with a beautiful engraved and bejeweled gold watch.

Francis Fleming's brother had died in the 1888 Jacksonville epidemic and the future Governor had witnessed the devastation it had inflicted in the city and also had great difficulty traveling around the state in order to carry out his campaign for Governor. After taking office in January of 1889, Governor Fleming's first official act was to call the Legislature into Special Session for February to create the State Board of Health. The FMA in the meantime met in January at its annual meeting in St. Augustine and drafted a proposed bill under the expert guidance of Dr. Wall and Dr. Porter, the 1884 and 1886 association presidents respectively, to create the State Board of Health, which was submitted to the Governor, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the President of the Senate. Dr. Wall's brother, Joseph B. Wall, a Tampa lawyer, was serving in the Senate at this time and later would become President of the Senate in 1891. Chapter 3839, Laws of Florida, creating the State Board of Health, as enacted by the House and Senate in the Special Session of 1889 provided in great detail for the qualifications of the physician who would serve as Florida's first State Health Officer. Dr. Porter met these requirements and was unanimously selected by the three member Board of Health to serve as Florida's first State Health Officer and then appointed by Governor Fleming. For the next 28 years from 1889 to 1917. Dr. Porter organized and administered the state's first health department, the State Board of Health, with great skill and vision. During his 7 terms of 4 years each, Dr. Porter successfully and innovatively built the foundation for Florida's great statewide public health system that we know today as the Florida Department of Health.

It was said of Dr. Porter after he passed away in 1927 at age 79, that "as long as there is a Florida his memory will be cherished." Dr. Wall had died earlier in 1895 at age 58 doing what he loved most giving a speech on medicine and public health to his physician colleagues at the annual meeting of the FMA in Gainesville. Governor Fleming died in Jacksonville in 1908 at age 67; and the area which his family settled on the St. Johns River south of Jacksonville and Orange Park is appropriately called and well known as Fleming Island. The original football facility at the University of Florida was named after Governor Fleming in 1915, and the area north of the current stadium is still known as Fleming Field. In addition to the creation of the State Board of Health, Governor Fleming was responsible for the addition of the red diagonal cross on the Florida flag, and he began the tradition of having an official portrait of Florida's Governors painted and placed in the Florida Capitol.

So it is entirely proper that the 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida is currently being celebrated in the Historic Capitol Museum this year through May 10, 2015. For it is in the Historic Capitol that the State Board of Health was born by act of the Florida Legislature in Special Session called by Governor Fleming, who then signed the Legislature's act into Florida Law. The important roles of Governor Francis Fleming, Dr. John Wall, and Dr. Joseph Porter in the creation of the State Board of Health constitute a legacy of caring and enlightened leadership for all Floridians to know about and be justly proud.