

History of Public Health in Florida

FPHA continues its series of history articles taking you from the beginning of the idea for a State Board of Health up to today's modern Florida Department of Health. In this month's article, Mr. Jackson tells us how the law was finally passed and the State Department of Health became official.

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YEARS

The Law Creating the State Board of Health on February 20, 1889
by E. Russell Jackson Jr.

Francis P. Fleming of Jacksonville, who was a candidate for Governor in 1888 during the yellow fever epidemic in that city, personally experienced the deadly ravages of yellow fever and its adverse impact on Florida's economy. His brother died in the Jacksonville epidemic and he himself was restricted in travel during his campaign for Governor. Physicians and others were warned that they could be shot on sight trying to go to counties adjoining those with yellow fever outbreaks. So yellow fever created chaotic conditions and restricted commerce and travel.

At the time of the 1888 epidemic in Jacksonville, the Legislature had not passed a law creating the State Board of Health despite efforts for it that had begun as far back as 1873 and its subsequent inclusion in the Florida Constitution of 1885 by the 1884 President of the Florida Medical Association (FMA), Dr. John P. Wall of Tampa, who was a delegate to the 1885 Constitutional Convention. As his first official act as the newly elected Governor, Francis Fleming called the Legislature into Special Session for February of 1889 to enact the State Board of Health into law. By this time, Dr. Wall was a member of the House of Representatives and his brother, Joseph B. Wall, was President of the Florida Senate.

In January of 1889, the FMA held a meeting in St. Augustine to draft proposed legislation to create the State Board of Health. The Proceedings of the FMA detail the daily discussions as this proposal was developed. When finalized the FMA's special Committee on the State Board of Health submitted it to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives for the Special Session of the Legislature. The FMA also submitted a proposed bill by Joseph Yates Porter, M.D., a Key West U.S. Army physician and a leading authority on yellow fever, who had been urgently called in 1888 by the Duval County Board of Health to lead the fight against the Jacksonville yellow fever epidemic. The legislation creating the State Board of Health, Chapter 3839, Laws of Florida, was enacted by the Legislature and signed into law by Governor Fleming on February 20, 1889, and contained these initial important provisions

“SECTION 1. That the Governor shall, within twenty days after the passage of this act, appoint three discreet citizens of the State of Florida, who shall be confirmed by the Senate, and who shall, after taking and subscribing an oath before some person competent to administer oaths, faithfully to perform the duties of their offices, constitute the State Board of Health.”

“SECTION 2. It shall be the duty of members of said Board to convene in the city of Tallahassee, upon a day to be named by the Governor, not more than ten days from the date of their appointment. It shall be the duty of said Board, at their first meeting, to elect one of their number as President of said Board. At the same meeting it shall be the duty of said Board to designate and employ a physician, who shall be an expert in the diagnosis of yellow fever, small-pox, cholera and other infectious diseases, and who must be a person of recognized ability and skilled in hygiene and sanitary science, and a graduate physician of a recognized and reputable medical college, which said person shall be known as the State Health Officer. The State Health Officer shall be the executive officer of the Board and Secretary of the same, and shall hold the office until removed by the Board for just cause.”

The members appointed by Governor Fleming to serve as the State Board of Health were: Richard P. Daniel, M.D. of Jacksonville, Mr. William B. Henderson of Tampa, and Mr. William K. Hyer of Pensacola. They met in Tallahassee on March 11, 1889, took the oath of office and elected Dr. Daniel as President and Mr. Hyer temporary Secretary. The members then unanimously selected Dr. Joseph Yates Porter of Key West to fill the position of State Health Officer and Secretary of the Board, and after due consideration chose Jacksonville for the home of the State Board of Health because of its superior facilities for prompt and rapid communication and transit, and it also was the residence of Dr. Daniel, the President of State Board of Health. So Dr. Porter began his great legacy of 28 years as Florida’s first State Health Officer, 1889-1917, from his headquarters in Jacksonville where he would start building Florida’s first statewide public health agency 125 years ago.

We need You!



As mentioned in Lesli’s article, we are in need of champions for our newly formed interest groups. You have an opportunity to make a difference now! Each group will have a Chair, a Chair-Elect and any other officers the group feels is appropriate. It is so important to have leadership in each area so that those members will be able to communicate amongst each other and share news about their area. To sign up, or for more information, please contact our Executive Office – floridapha@bellsouth.net or 904-529-1401.