

FPHA Poster Session at the Annual Conference

Only a short time to submit a poster application. Deadline is Friday, June 6, 2014. For detailed information:

[http://fpha.org/Resources/Documents/2014%20FPHA Poster Session Announcement 2014final.pdf](http://fpha.org/Resources/Documents/2014%20FPHA%20Poster%20Session%20Announcement%202014final.pdf)

Exhibit Opportunities at the FPHA Annual Meeting

There is still room if you want to exhibit at the upcoming FPHA meeting. The Exhibit application and information is here:

<http://fpha.org/Resources/Documents/2014%20FPHA%20EXHIBITOR%20PROSPECTUS.pdf>

History of Public Health in Florida



Dr. Wilson Sowder and the Golden Era of Public Health in Florida

by E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

Editor's note: *So far this year you have read about the very early years of public health in Florida. This month's article on Dr. Wilson T. Sowder brings us the numerous additional programs and services added under his leadership. I know many of you still remember Dr. Sowder, and some even had the honor to work with him (your Executive Director included). He had fascinating stories to tell and you can see from this article, why there were so many. Thanks to Russ Jackson for providing insight into the great history of public health in Florida.*

Wilson T. Sowder, M.D., M.P.H. was the longest serving State Health Officer in Florida history, serving 29 years from 1945 to 1974. Dr. Sowder and Florida's first State Health Officer, Joseph Yates Porter, M.D., who served for 28 years, 1889 to 1917, combined to serve as Florida's State Health Officers for 57 years. For 52 of those years they were in charge of the Florida State Board of Health, which Dr. Porter started in 1889 and which ended by act of the Florida Legislature in 1969, the beginning of the final five years of Dr. Sowder's administration. The golden era of public health in Florida began with Dr. Porter's development of the State Board of Health and the initial steps he led to create a statewide public health system. This golden era continued during Dr. Sowder's tenure as State Health Officer as the State Board of Health reached its zenith as one of the finest modern state public health agencies in the United States with county health departments in all 67 counties of the state.

Dr. Sowder was born the eighth of thirteen children to John Harvey Sowder and Mary Catherine Webb Sowder on February 27, 1910 in Callaway, Franklin County, Virginia on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. His father, whose ancestors came to Virginia in 1729 from Pennsylvania, owned a farm and ran the area's general store. Young Wilson Sowder was educated first in a one room school house then later in an Episcopal high school near Charlottesville where he boarded because of the distance from his family's home. He was fortunate to have good teachers and he entered the University of Virginia in Charlottesville at age 16. He had to work his way through school but also won scholarships and became interested in medicine while working in the University library. Two years later at the age of 18 he entered the University of Virginia's outstanding medical school. While at the University of Virginia, he had the honor of staying in the dormitory built by Thomas Jefferson before he died in 1826 on the Lawn in front of the University's famous Rotunda. In 1932, Wilson Sowder received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Virginia with honors. He was only 22.

Dr. Sowder completed an internship at the University of Iowa Hospitals and a residency at St. Luke's Hospital in San Francisco. One of his scholarships at the University of Virginia had a requirement that he serve as a medical officer in the Navy or Army. However, at that time during the Great Depression neither service was accepting new medical officers. So the University of Virginia released Dr. Sowder from his military commitment. While at his internship in San Francisco he became interested in being a medical missionary for the Episcopal Church in Japan. But he lost interest in that opportunity when the physician recruiting him for it died suddenly. Subsequently, he and one of his fellow interns saw an advertisement in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* for commissioned officers in the U. S. Public Health Service. He took the examination successfully and entered the U.S. Public Health Service as a commissioned officer in 1934. He then served at the U. S. Marine Hospitals in Baltimore and Seattle, with the U.S. Coast Guard in Alaska, the U.S. Quarantine Station in San Francisco, and on assignment by the U.S. Public Health Service as Director of the Venereal Disease Program for the Tennessee Department of Health. He received his Master of Public Health degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1939.

His first special assignment in Florida for the U. S. Public Health Service was in 1940, when he was sent there by the U.S. Surgeon General in response to the concern of the Secretary of the Navy with a high incidence of venereal disease among the military in Pensacola. So he worked closely with the commanding officers of the Navy and Army bases there as well as the Escambia County Health Department and the State Board of Health. In 1941 he was sent to Tampa in Hillsborough County by the U.S. Public Health Service to help the city health officer with that city's venereal disease program. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941 and the entrance of the United States in World War II, the Hillsborough County Health Officer, Dr. Joseph Spoto, was recruited by the U.S. Public Health Service and transferred away from Tampa. Dr. Sowder was then named to replace him as the director of the Hillsborough County Health Department while he continued in the U.S. Public Health Service. One of the first things Dr. Sowder did was to combine the city and county health departments into a single county health department in order to handle the school health program, and to provide more efficient and effective public health services for Hillsborough County. In April of 1942, Dr. Sowder was transferred from Tampa to Jacksonville by the U.S. Public Health Service to direct the State Board of Health's venereal disease program under the direction of the State Health Officer, Dr. William H. Pickett, who had been appointed by Governor Spessard Holland to fill out the unexpired term of Dr. A. B., McCreary, who had died in office. Dr. Henry Hanson was subsequently reappointed by Governor Holland as State Health Officer in July of 1942. Dr. Hanson had served as State Health Officer from 1929 to 1935 then left to pursue his interests in international health. Dr. Hanson named Dr. Sowder as Director of the Bureau of Local Health Services in charge of county health departments and as his Assistant State Health Officer.

When he heard rumors that he might replace Dr. Hanson, Dr. Sowder did not want in any way to precipitate that out of respect for Dr. Hanson. So he asked for and received a transfer from the U.S. Public Health Service to Washington, D.C. in 1944 to serve as a Communicable Disease Consultant in the War Shipping Administration. He then was transferred to the U.S. Public Health Service Regional Office in Dallas for the remainder of World War II. Upon the retirement of Dr. Hanson, Florida's new Governor, Millard Caldwell, appointed Dr. Sowder as Florida's tenth State Health Officer on September 15, 1945. In order to accept this most important and prestigious position, Dr. Sowder took a leave of absence without pay from the U.S. Public Health Service, but maintained his close relationship with the U. S. Public Health Service throughout his career as State Health Officer for the great benefit of Florida's public health.

Dr. Sowder would bring Florida's public health system into the modern era of medicine and public health to be recognized by authorities as one of the finest state public health agencies and systems in the nation. He served under Governor Caldwell during his term, 1945-49, and Dr. Sowder continued to be reappointed by Governor Caldwell's successors: Fuller Warren, 1949-1952; Dan McCarty, 1953; Charlie Johns, 1953-1955; Leroy Collins, 1955-1960; Farris Bryant, 1961-1964; Haydon Burns, 1965-1966; Claude Kirk, 1967-1970; and Reuben Askew, 1971-1974.

Under Dr. Sowder's leadership county health departments were established in every county of the state with St. Johns being the last county in 1960. Florida made countless significant advances in public health during his administration. These included: the development of environmental health services statewide including air and water pollution control; mosquito control; the development of the state and regional laboratories into one of the finest public health laboratory systems in the world: inauguration of a program for the hospitalization of the medically indigent: development of a statewide mental health program; the organization of one of the most outstanding research programs in a state health department; the oversight of public health inspections and public health educational programs for hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities around the state; the development of emergency medical services and standards for their personnel and operations; radiation surveillance and radiological health services; narcotics law enforcement; medical and dental scholarship programs; school health services; visiting nurses programs; public health nutrition services; newborn screening; and many other health services that were innovatively created in the State Board of Health. Dr. Sowder was very proud of the fact that he was instrumental in helping the President of the University of Florida, Dr. J. Hillis Miller, receive a Commonwealth Fund planning grant that was important to the establishment of the first state supported medical school in Florida at the University of Florida in Gainesville which opened in 1956. He was also asked by the President of the University of South Florida, Dr. John Allen, to assist him with the planning for the College of Medicine to be established at the University of South Florida in Tampa which opened in 1971.

Dr. Sowder was responsible for organizing the State Board of Health's administrative structure and appointed outstanding public health professionals from around the United States to direct them and to support and work closely with all the county health departments in the state. Dr. Sowder also recruited many outstanding public health professionals to the county level in Florida including Dr. Carl Brumback who was the founding county health officer of the Palm Beach County Health Department in 1950. Later in his career Dr. Sowder went to Washington for fifteen months in 1961 and 1962 to help the Secretary of the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare establish the important federal Office of Aging.

During the first part of his tenure as State Health Officer, the Florida Legislature met only every two years in 60-day sessions and then began to meet annually. Dr. Sowder was a frequent visitor to the Capitol in Tallahassee as he and his bureau chiefs advocated for public health programs and funding. Some of the legislative laws passed by the Legislature while he was State Health Officer included: the pasteurization of milk; central sewage treatment systems; the fluoridation of public water supplies; nurses for school health services in every school; compulsory immunizations for school entrance; statewide intestinal hookworm eradication; mosquito control; funding for tuberculosis hospitals and community TB programs; and many more. Dr. Sowder provided the Legislature with his expert testimony and that of his highly trained staff of public health professionals for the creation and funding of essential public health programs and services for the protection and promotion of the public health in an increasingly complex and rapidly growing state. The health status of Floridians improved dramatically during Dr. Sowder's tenure with significantly better morbidity and mortality rates. These improvements were recognized and praised by the U.S. Public Health Service in 1955 as being due to Florida's outstanding state and local health department system.

Dr. Sowder opposed the elimination of the State Board of Health in the Constitutional Revision of 1968 which was recommended by the Constitutional Revision Commission of 1966. Without the Constitutional provision protecting the State Board of Health, the agency was abolished by the Legislature in 1969 along with many other state boards of less significance. So the State Board of Health by legislative act became the Division of Health in the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) in 1969. No longer was the State Health Officer appointed by the Governor, but rather by the Secretary of HRS, a mammoth social services agency with divergent and often competing health and non-health services. Dr. Sowder served as Director of the Division of Health until his retirement in 1974. After his retirement, Dr. Sowder opposed the HRS Reorganization Act of 1975 which separated the State Health Officer from direction of the state public health laboratory, vital statistics, county health departments, and many other essential public health services that were at the heart of the State Board of Health.

For the next two decades, Dr. Sowder was the strongest and most outspoken advocate for separating public health out of HRS, which ultimately happened by unanimous act of the Legislature with the passage of the Senator William G. "Doc" Myers Act of 1996, which reestablished the position of State Health Officer appointed by the Governor as the Secretary of the Florida Department of Health and the State Surgeon General of Florida.

In 1999, the Legislature named the 1911 State Board of Health Building in Jacksonville in Dr. Sowder's honor to house the Florida Museum of Medicine and Public Health. The State Board of Health's headquarters building was dedicated to Dr. Sowder on November 20, 2002 in a special ceremony that he and his family attended. Dr. Sowder's successor as State Health Officer and his former State Epidemiologist, E. Charlton Prather, M.D., M.P.H., served as the dedication's master of ceremonies and welcomed all the many dignitaries and several hundred distinguished guests assembled in front of the State Board of Health Building. For decades the State Board of Health's headquarters had been known as the Julia Street Building for the street it once faced when Julia Street went that far into the State Board of Health's campus complex. The Secretary of the new Department of Health and State Health Officer, John O. Agwunobi, M.D., M.P.H., representing Governor Jeb Bush, dedicated the State Board of Health building in Dr. Sowder's honor and presented Dr. Sowder with the Governor's Proclamation.

Dr. Sowder and his wife of seventy years, Lucille Margaret Leslie Sowder, a registered nurse he first met during his internship at the University of Iowa, had three children: Jane Sowder Palmer, Wilson Thomas Sowder, Jr., M.D., and James Leslie Sowder. Mrs. Sowder died in 2004 and Dr. Sowder on February 16, 2007 just a few days short of his 97th birthday. Dr. Wilson Sowder's place in public health in Florida ranks at the very top with Florida's iconic founding State Health Officer, Dr. Joseph Yates Porter. Together they truly accounted for the Golden Era of public health in Florida. The foundation of public health in Florida that they built lives on in the hands of all their successors as State Health Officer and with all who continue to serve the people and their health in this great state of Florida.