

## HISTORY OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN FLORIDA

*FPHA will have a series of history articles each month taking you from the beginning of the idea for a State Board of Health up to today's modern Florida Department of Health. We are pleased to have E. Russell Jackson, Jr. write these articles. Russ has been a long time employee in the public health area and is also a member of FPHA.*

### The 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Public Health in Florida

by E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

#### Part One

The Florida State Board of Health was enacted 125 years ago by the Florida Legislature in a special session called by Governor Francis Fleming and signed into law by the Governor on February 20, 1889. This date marks the beginning of Florida's first state health department and the development of Florida's statewide public health system to all 67 counties in the state.

The creation of the State Board of Health did not come easily and was led by the efforts of a Tampa physician, John P. Wall, M.D., who deserves the designation of historians as the Father of the State Board of Health.

In 1871, Dr. Wall boarded a steamer in Tampa Bay to treat a cabin boy afflicted with the dreadful disease of yellow fever that had caused death to Floridians in every part of the state throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Wall himself contracted the disease, and his wife and son soon fatally succumbed to it. This started Dr. Wall's lifelong crusade against yellow fever, as well as his new mission to create a State Board of Health and statewide public health system to prevent and control communicable diseases throughout the entire state. Dr. Wall became involved with his state medical association, the then fledgling Florida Medical Association at its second annual meeting in 1875 in Jacksonville. He had an immediate impact. He was elected to membership, presented a paper entitled "Preventive Medicine," and was elected second vice president and delegate to the American Medical Association. Importantly, at this meeting the FMA adopted a proposed State Board of Health legislative bill and appointed a committee chaired by Dr. Wall to present this proposal to the Florida Legislature. This was the first major legislative project proposed by the FMA.

Dr. Wall lobbied the Legislature for the establishment of the State Board of Health. It did not happen right away. When he became president of the FMA in 1884, he was also elected as a delegate to Florida's Third Constitutional Convention at St. Joseph, now Port St. Joe, and by this time he was a member of the Florida House of Representatives representing Hillsborough County. He singlehandedly was responsible for the inclusion of the State Board of Health in Florida's Constitution at that

time. Article XV, Public Health, of the 1885 Florida Constitution contained these provisions: “Section 1. The Legislature shall establish a State Board of Health and also County Boards of Health in all counties where it may be necessary. Section 2. The State Board of Health shall have supervision of all matters relating to public health, with such duties, powers, and responsibilities as may be prescribed by law. Section 3. The County Boards of Health shall have such powers and be under the supervision of the State Board of Health to such extent as the Legislature may prescribe.”

Dr. Wall expected the Legislature to enact the State Board of Health at its first opportunity. However, in successive sessions after 1885, the Legislature failed to do so on the premise that it cost too much money, while some officials feared centralization of public health powers at the state level. Finally, with the outbreak of another yellow fever epidemic in Jacksonville in 1888, all the stars of the constellations in Florida politics were aligned for the State Board of Health to be created by the Legislature in a special session called by Governor Fleming for February of 1889.

*Next month — The State Board of Health becomes official.*

### **January is Birth Defects Prevention Month**

Please view the latest press release about the importance of folic acid, and other news at the Florida Department of Health Online Newsroom:

<http://newsroom.doh.state.fl.us/>