

125 Years of Public Health in Florida

Miami's First Public Health Officer: James M. Jackson, Jr., M.D.

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

Miami's first public health officer was James M. Jackson, Jr., M.D., the first physician to live and practice in Henry Flagler's new resort town of Miami starting in 1896. Dr. Jackson's father, James M. Jackson, Sr., M.D., was the country doctor for Bronson, Florida, just west of Gainesville. Bronson in the latter part of the 19th century was on the route of David Levy Yulee's railroad from Fernandina north of Jacksonville in Nassau County, south through Gainesville and Bronson, toward its destination at the nearby port of Cedar Key on the Gulf of Mexico



Dr. Jackson, Sr. had been born in 1831 in the Chester District of South Carolina. In 1850 he and his family moved to White Springs, near present day Lake City, on the Suwannee River, Florida's first resort community because of its perceived healthful springs. After receiving his medical degree from the Medical College of New Orleans, later Tulane University Medical School, Dr. Jackson, Sr. married Mary Glenn Shands in 1858, then he served as a surgeon in the confederate cavalry during the Civil War. After the war their only son, who would become Miami's first public health officer, was born on March 19, 1866 in White Springs. Dr. Jackson, Sr. and his wife and infant son, along with other members of the Jackson and Shands families from South Carolina, then moved to Bronson, at that time a thriving and developing citrus town.

As a boy, young James Jackson became interested in his father's profession of medicine, and after graduating from East Florida Seminary in Gainesville and Emory University in Georgia with a bachelor's degree, and with his mother's encouragement, he journeyed north to Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York City, and received his M.D. degree in 1886. He then joined his father's medical practice in Bronson, which had about 5,000 residents and could support two physicians. However, freezes in 1894 and 1895 destroyed much of the citrus tree crops in Bronson and much of Florida leading to large numbers of people fleeing to more southern parts of the state. Miami was one part of the state that had escaped these two freezes, inspiring Henry Flagler to extend his Florida East Coast Railroad further south from Lake Worth to the newly developing town of Miami. There, Flagler would build Miami's first luxury hotel, the Royal Palm, and attract settlers and tourists who would need a physician to live and practice in their new town.

So after practicing with his father in Bronson, young Dr. Jackson was invited by Henry Flagler to become his physician in residence in Miami for the Florida East Coast Railroad. In March of 1896, Dr. Jackson took Flagler's train from Jacksonville to Fort Lauderdale, then its southern most terminus, and went by boat the rest of the way to Miami. He thought at first that the rudimentary town he found, with its unpaved roads and unpainted buildings, would not be an acceptable place to bring his new bride, Ethel Barco, to start their life together.

However, Dr. Jackson was unable to leave the town by any means that day, so while staying overnight, the town's leaders convinced him that someday Miami would be a great place to live and persuaded him to move there. He wrote Ethel: "This Miami spirit is a great thing. It is infectious." So when Miami was incorporated in July of 1896, Dr. Jackson was the sole physician residing in Miami.

In addition to his duties as the railroad surgeon for Henry Flagler, Dr. Jackson was appointed by Florida's first State Health Officer, Joseph Yates Porter, M.D., in May of 1896 as the local agent for the Florida State Board of Health. In this capacity Dr. Jackson became a trusted and loyal friend of Dr. Porter. As the district physician agent in Miami and Dade County for Dr. Porter and the Florida State Board of Health, Dr. Porter "inspected all ships that stopped at Miami, organized the fight against epidemics such as measles, dengue fever, smallpox, and yellow fever, and he periodically issued health directives to the citizenry." He brought and enforced basic sanitation measures. When Flagler's Royal Palm Hotel opened in January of 1897, Dr. Jackson also became the physician for its guests. As the local health officer for the State Board of Health, Dr. Jackson quarantined the town during the yellow fever epidemic of 1899, and organized the Miami City Board of Health in 1914. His own office and surgery were behind his home that he built in the emerging town on what is now N.E. 2nd Avenue, and moved to its present location in 1917 at 190 S.E. 12th Terrace, where Dr. Jackson's office can be seen to this day as a designated historic site.

Community leaders recognized that Miami needed a hospital. Residents, tourists, and indigents became ill and there was no place to take care of them. An emergency hospital had been built during the yellow fever epidemic in 1899, and Dr. Jackson with the help of Dr. Porter himself was in charge of that temporary hospital. After the epidemic was over it was burned to the ground. As Flagler began to extend his railroad even further south to Key West, efforts were made for two additional small hospitals to take care of those patients in need, but neither of them was adequate. After organizing the Miami City Board of Health in 1914 and being elected its first President, Dr. Jackson was tasked with building a new city hospital. This task was completed with the opening of the doors of the Miami City Hospital in June of 1918 with Dr. Jackson the President of the hospital.



Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami

Dr. Jackson as the first physician and public health officer in Miami was a leader in his community. He was a founder and first President of the Rotary Club of Miami in 1917, and a charter member of the First United Methodist Church of Miami. He and his wife Ethel had two daughters, Ethel and Helen. Their infant son died soon after birth. Dr. Jackson was a founder of the Dade County Medical Association in 1903, its second President in 1905 and then again in 1923. In 1905 he was inaugurated as President of the Florida Medical Association and in his Presidential Address in 1906 at the FMA Annual Meeting called for physician unity. In 1911 he served as President of the Southern Medical Association.

When Dr. Jackson died at only 58 years of age on April 2, 1924 of a lung infection, local businesses closed for a day to mourn his passing. The Miami City Commission immediately renamed the Miami City Hospital to the James M. Jackson Memorial Hospital in his honor. In the decades since, Jackson Memorial Hospital has grown into the comprehensive health care system and teaching hospital that we know today. The original 1918 City of Miami Hospital that Dr. Jackson built still stands as the centerpiece of the 76 acre University of Miami/Jackson Health System campus and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This building is affectionately known as the Alamo by the physician residents and medical students who had the honor over the years of working and sleeping in it because of its resemblance to the Alamo of Texas history fame in San Antonio.

The May 1924 issue of *The Journal of the Florida Medical Association* dedicated two pages to Dr. Jackson's memory. A tribute next to his photograph reads: "A friend to all humanity—the memory of James M. Jackson will be held in one of loved reverence and respect by all who knew him. Dr. Jackson devoted his life to the relief of suffering humanity. His services were as much at the command of the needy as the affluent, a call of distress was a call to duty—and with him he never swerved where duty called. He lived a beautiful life." Dr. Jackson was clearly one of the most caring and dynamic physician leaders in the early years of Florida's public health system, who was a colleague and respected friend of Dr. Porter. Dr. Jackson's inspiring legacy as Miami's first physician and public health officer lives on.

Are You Ready for the Health Equity Movement in Florida?

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Are you ready? An exciting paradigm shift is happening in public health, and **health equity** is at the heart of it! Health inequities are a result of unfair policies and unequal distribution of social, economic, and environmental conditions that are needed for good health. These inequities lead to health disparities, defined as the difference in health status between groups. Eliminating health disparities has been a public health goal since the establishment of the Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2000 health improvement strategy nearly 25 years ago. Since then, our public health infrastructure has galvanized countless resources all in an effort to eliminate, or at least reduce, health disparities. Needless to say, it has been a challenge that is yet to be completely overcome.

Now, a paradigm shift is occurring. While health disparities are not being ignored, public health is now addressing the policies and inequitable distribution of social, economic, and environmental conditions that caused these health disparities in the first place. This is how we will achieve health equity. Additionally, implementing the Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Service (CLAS) Standards in healthcare settings to ensure that clinicians understand and respect patients' cultural and linguistic differences is one more way to achieve health equity. In fact, CLAS implementation is required for most healthcare organizations seeking accreditation, including the Florida Department of Health.

The Florida Public Health Association (FPHA) is among those organizations leading the effort to inform public health practitioners, health service providers, public health partners, and others about the health equity movement in the state of Florida. There is a role for everyone to play in achieving health equity in our state. Do you know what your role is?