

History of Public Health in Florida

FPHA continues to provide you with information on the history of our public health system as we all celebrate 125 Years of Public Health in Florida. Mr. Russell Jackson selected one of Public Health's great heroes – Dr. Joseph Yates Porter for this issue. The article this month is a little longer than we usually have, but Dr. Porter was a significant person in starting and leading the public health program for many years. We hope you enjoy and learn a lot in this month's installment.

Dr. Joseph Yates Porter: Florida's First State Health Officer

by E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

Joseph Yates Porter was born in Key West on October 21, 1847 to a prominent family. His maternal grandfather, Thomas Mann Randolph, a U.S. Navy Captain and a member of the noted Virginia family related to Thomas Jefferson, died of yellow fever in Key West when he was 37 and commander of the United States revenue cutter *Washington*. His merchant father, also named Joseph Yates Porter of Charleston who had settled in Key West as a young man, died from yellow fever two weeks before his birth. Young Joseph's paternal uncle, W. D. Porter, was a distinguished Charleston lawyer who served as lieutenant governor of South Carolina. When he was just 13, the youth's mother, Mary Simms Randolph Porter, also died. He was then raised by his maternal grandmother, Susan Eaton Randolph.

Living in Confederate Florida during the American Civil War, the young boy got into trouble leading a rebel group called the Key West Volunteers in a futile attack on Fort Taylor held by the Union Army. As a result, he and his Grandmother Randolph were ordered out of Key West by the Commanding Officer of Fort Taylor. Mrs. Randolph took the youth to live with her in Cooperstown, New York, and later enrolled him as a student at St. Mary's Hall in Burlington, New Jersey. He subsequently enrolled at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and was awarded the Doctor of Medicine degree in 1870. Important to his later fame, Dr. Porter contracted yellow fever as a medical student in the summer of 1867 while studying medicine in a former Army surgeon's office. He was desperately ill with yellow fever, but survived despite the poisonous medications he was given. Thus, from this illness he acquired immunity from yellow fever that enabled him as a physician to become a nationally recognized expert on yellow fever and to help countless others combat this deadly contagious disease. The year of his graduation from medical school, Dr. Porter accepted an appointment as a Lieutenant and acting surgeon in the U.S. Army and was assigned to Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas, 70 miles west of Key West where Dr. Samuel Mudd of Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth fame, had been imprisoned from 1865 to 1869. Dr. Porter benefitted from Dr. Mudd's written records of his treatment of the yellow fever victims at Fort Jefferson during his tenure as a prisoner there. At Fort Jefferson, Dr. Porter's duties for more than three years as acting assistant surgeon included caring for those stricken by recurrent yellow fever epidemics.

On June 2, 1870, Dr. Porter was married to Louise Curry, a daughter of William Curry, a leading merchant of Key West, who would bear him four children. In 1875 Dr. Porter was transferred by the U.S. Army to Fort Ringold, Texas, where combat with the Indians was mixed with the clinical treatment of Indian children. By 1880, Dr. Porter had obtained the rank of Captain. Five years later he was scheduled for another promotion when the Army's medical board at San Antonio determined he had a heart condition.

So he returned to Key West while still retaining his Army commission as an assistant surgeon on permanent sick leave awaiting retirement. During his Army career Dr. Porter had experienced numerous yellow fever epidemics, and although the source and spread of this dreadful disease was still unknown, Dr. Porter had acquired a reputation in the management of yellow fever epidemics second to no one in the United States.

After his return to Key West, Dr. Porter served as chairman of the Monroe County Board of Health. In 1886 he became President of the Florida Medical Association and vigorously supported the efforts of Dr. John Wall of Tampa to establish a State Board of Health, the provision for which had been placed in Florida's Constitution of 1885 by Dr. Wall as a delegate to the state constitutional convention. During 1887 Dr. Porter was in charge of managing the yellow fever epidemic in Key West and also was in charge of government relief measures during the yellow fever epidemic that year in Tampa. In the summer of 1888 as a visitor to Jacksonville, Dr. Porter had been called in consultation by a colleague to see a patient suspected of having yellow fever. So he confirmed the first diagnosis of yellow fever in what would become the historic epidemic of 1888 in Jacksonville. Dr. Porter sailed back to Key West by schooner, but was soon called back by urgent telegram from the Duval County Board of Health to provide his assistance to the panic stricken Jacksonville. Dr. Porter was put in charge of all medical and nursing care and all relief measures of the Duval County Board of Health, the Marine Hospital Service, and the Auxiliary Sanitary Association. It is difficult in modern times to comprehend what yellow fever did to the population of the city, but many people fled if they could find a place that would accept them, while most went to refugee camps that were established outside the city. Mail delivery ceased, while mail coming into or going out of the city was fumigated, and lime was spread in the streets, houses, and shops. Canon and firearms were discharged at night. Persons trying to go to other counties could be shot on sight and rail travel was disrupted. Aside from providing comfort to those who were stricken with the disease, Dr. Porter directed that every house in the city where there had been a case of yellow fever be fumigated. He also supervised the receipt, custody, and distribution of funds, food, and clothing for the decimated residents. Over 10,000 of Duval County's 26,800 residents had fled. 16,000 persons remained in Jacksonville, 14,000 of whom were without employment because of the complete disruption of business.

By January of 1889 the epidemic was over. The then unknown source of yellow fever, the mosquito *aedes aegypti*, had died off from the cold weather. Among those who had remained in Jacksonville, there were 5,000 reported cases of yellow fever with 400 deaths. Dr. Porter had brought a measure of calm to the city as an authoritative physician with a distinguished and commanding countenance who knew how to treat, manage, and control the disease while coordinating the community's resources in this time of crisis. In a special ceremony on January 21, 1889, the grateful City of Jacksonville's Auxiliary Sanitary Association presented Dr. Porter with an expensive gold pocket watch that was decorated with rubies and diamonds. Dr. Porter described the watch himself: "The watch had Swiss movement, made abroad, with bell chimes striking the quarter of the hour and minutes distinctive and separate in tone. The front of the double case was studded with large diamonds set as a 'P' and the inside of the back of the case inscribed with name and language elegantly expressing to Dr. Porter the appreciation of the Auxiliary Association for his devotion to the people of Jacksonville during a most trying time of sickness.

The chain was a heavy gold cable and the charm a miniature representation of a cork 'life buoy' such as ships carry over their sterns for emergency use to passengers who fall overboard. In the middle of one side of the chain a star in diamonds, and on the other a ruby 'P.'" This exquisite watch would later be of great historical significance and a mystery of interest to many including a future Governor of Florida.

The next month the Florida Legislature met in special session called by the new Governor Francis Fleming of Jacksonville who signed the bill into law creating the State Board of Health on February 20, 1889. The State Board of Health then held its first meeting in Tallahassee on March 11, 1889 and selected Dr. Porter because of his national reputation and his proven qualifications as Florida's first State Health Officer. He was enthusiastically appointed by Governor Fleming. Jacksonville was also chosen by the Board as the agency headquarters for the State Board of Health because of the city's superior transportation facilities and communications.

Dr. Porter served as Florida's State Health Officer for 7 terms, each lasting 4 years, for a total of 28 years from 1889 to 1917. Dr. Porter's first three terms from 1889 to 1901 was a period in which the activity of the State Board of Health was centered initially on yellow fever and other contagious diseases such as smallpox and cholera in which he employed health education, including the monthly publication of *Florida Health Notes* he started in June of 1892, and the tools of quarantine and fumigation to prevent the spread of these diseases. During Dr. Porter's last 4 terms, 1901-1917, the State Board of Health continued to deal with the prevention and control of communicable diseases including yellow fever, malaria, smallpox, tuberculosis, and typhoid fever, but Dr. Porter also led the State Board of Health into expanded roles and in 1911 built its permanent headquarters building on Julia Street in Jacksonville.

His accomplishments are legion full of firsts for public health in Florida. To mention a few, he appointed local physicians as assistant health officers reporting directly to him in place of county boards of health which he found uncooperative and were later abolished by the Legislature. He developed a health exhibit to go around the state by train as part of his emphasis on health education for the general public. He established the first medical library in the state as a key component of the State Board of Health, as well as a system for the reporting of communicable diseases by local physicians and the first voluntary then mandatory reporting of births and deaths with their causes. From his first year he published the Annual Report of the State Board of Health and established a central bacteriologic laboratory in Jacksonville in 1903 with regional laboratories in Tampa and Pensacola in 1910 and Tallahassee and Miami in 1914. He employed the first public health nurses in Florida initially for tuberculosis control and health education, and employed the first sanitary engineer to assure safe water and sewage disposal, as well as the first public health veterinarian for the animal disease control program. He strongly effectively supported vaccinations for smallpox and measures against typhoid fever, dengue fever, malaria, hookworm, and other diseases afflicting Floridians and their children. The last outbreak of a yellow fever as an epidemic in Florida occurred in Pensacola in 1905. Dr. Porter initiated a maritime quarantine program to prevent entry of the major communicable diseases that was ultimately assumed and applied by the U.S. Public Health Service to all the maritime states. He began the licensure of funeral directors and embalmers. He also started services for indigent crippled children in 1912 with wards for them at two hospitals in Jacksonville. During this latter period of Dr. Porter's tenure as State Health Officer, the organization of public health in Florida began its development as a modern organization with the establishment of bureaus and the assignment and delegation of authority and responsibilities by Dr. Porter to them under his supervision as State Health Officer.

Although he had to deal with the apathy, ignorance, and politics of his day, and the limitations of medical science and practices to that point in time, Dr. Porter built the foundation upon which Florida's public health system of today has evolved over the last 125 years through the dedicated work of all his successors as State Health Officer and all who have worked so arduously in the service of public health at the state and county levels of our great state. Retiring as State Health Officer in 1917, Dr. Porter was reactivated at the age of 70 by the U.S. Army during World War I with a commission of Lieutenant Colonel, serving at Fort Jackson in South Carolina and at Camp Johnston in Jacksonville. At his family home in Key West, Dr. Porter wrote about his career in public health in Florida for a speech he made at the annual meeting of the Florida Medical Association House of Delegates in 1925, which was published over a period of seven issues of *The Journal of the Florida Medical Association* from July of 1925 to January of 1926.

On March 16, 1927, Dr. Porter died in Key West at age 79 in the same room of his family's home in which he was born. A memorial tribute soon followed stating that Dr. Porter "was a pioneer in preventive medicine and his merited achievements, rendering living conditions better in the state, are now history. As long as there is a Florida, his memory will be cherished."



125 Years of Public Health!

The Florida Department of Health is commemorating 125 years of Florida Public Health during 2014 with educational and health information opportunities for Florida's residents and visitors. FPHA President-Elect, Greg Danyluk, 1st Vice President, Shannon Hughes and FPHA Executive Director, Sandra Magyar were able to attend the Florida Department of Health's Special Program on February 20th celebrating the actual day the law creating the State Board of Health was signed. Earlier that day Governor Scott signed a Proclamation recognizing the 125 Years and all the work that has been and is currently being done by the now Florida Department of Health. It was an outstanding program. Many former State Health Officers were in attendance, as well as retired public health workers from around the state. FDOH had a display of interesting historic memorabilia at the event. And there are additional items in the other FDOH Buildings on the Tallahassee campus where attendees were encouraged to take a Legacy Walk to see them all. To read the Governor's Proclamation, and other information, please visit www.FLHealth125.gov

The Florida Public Health Association is also commemorating this event by posting news and photos from around the state on their web site, <http://fpha.org/> A few pictures are included here.



Orange County workers view items.



Sarasota past and current Directors—Bill Little, Dr. Mark Magenheimer and Charles Henry.



St. Johns County celebration.



← Hillsborough County Employees make a toast.

Visit us today to view all the photos from Orange, St. Johns, Hillsborough, and Sarasota Counties:

<http://www.fpha.org/Default.aspx?pageId=1816224>