



## History of Public Health in Florida

### Dr. Henry Hanson and the Years Between Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

*Editor's note: As we continue to celebrate 125 years of Florida Public Health, please take some time to read and learn about our history. This article also shares when FPHA was started. Many thanks to Russ Jackson for providing insight into the great history of public health in Florida.*

Joseph Yates Porter, M.D. served as Florida's first State Health Officer from the beginning of the State Board of Health in 1889 to 1917. His 28 years as State Health Officer were only surpassed by the 29 years of Wilson T. Sowder, M.D., who served as State Health Officer from 1945 to 1974. These are two of the leading icons in the history of public health in Florida based on the extended and unapproached length of their service as State Health Officer, for the foundation of public health that Dr. Porter so admirably started, and for Florida's modern public health system that Dr. Sowder brought into fruition in the era of modern medicine and Florida's accelerated population growth. The years in between Dr. Porter's and Dr. Sowder's tenures as State Health Officer, 1917 to 1945, saw tremendous national and worldwide events that impacted all Floridians and public health in our state. These cataclysmic events included the United States entering World War I in 1917, the Influenza epidemic of 1918, the Great Depression of 1929, and the United States entering World War II upon the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan on December 7, 1941.

When Governor Sydney Catts took office in January of 1917, Dr. Porter resigned at age 70 and rejoined the U.S. Army as a Lieutenant Colonel, serving at army bases in South Carolina and Florida during World War I. Governor Catts appointed W. H. Cox, M.D., a practicing physician from Brooksville, to succeed Dr. Porter as State Health Officer. Dr. Cox served only two years to 1919 when he apparently fell from favor with the Governor. Dr. Cox was succeeded by Ralph N. Greene, M.D. who completed Dr. Cox's term ending in 1921. Raymond C. Turck, M.D., who had led the early indigent crippled children's programs at two hospitals in Jacksonville that Dr. Porter started in 1912, became State Health Officer in 1921 serving to 1925. Dr. Turck then resigned and he was replaced by B. L. Arms, M.D., who at the time was Director of the Diagnostic Laboratories for the State Board of Health, and who served from 1925 to 1929. He was followed by Henry Hanson, M.D., who was the Director of the Division of Bacteriologic Laboratories of the State Board of Health. Dr. Hanson served two tenures as State Health Officer, 1929-1935 and 1942-45. Dr. Hanson was succeeded after his first term by W. A. McPhaul, M.D., 1935-1939, A. B. McCreary, M.D., 1939-1940, and W. H. Pickett, M.D., 1941-42. So in between, the iconic Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder there were eight State Health Officers. The most notable from his length of service of nine years and from a historic standpoint is Dr. Hanson, whose contributions were well recognized with the naming of the State Board of Health's central laboratory building in Jacksonville in 1959 as "The Henry Hanson Building."

In their important monograph on the history of public health in Florida that was published on the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the State Board of Health in 1964, Albert V. Hardy, M.D., who was at that time Director of the Bureau of Laboratories under Dr. Sowder, and his co-author, May Pynchon, characterized the period of 1917 to 1932 as a period of “retarded growth” for the State Board of Health. The State Board of Health was plagued by inadequate budgets to sustain critically important public health programs. In his excellent complementary article to *Millstones and Milestones* for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the State Board of Health in the *Florida Journal of Public Health* in 1989, William J. Bigler, Ph.D., Deputy State Epidemiologist for the State Health Office, captured very well this era in which the State Health Officers who succeeded Dr. Porter tried to keep the State Board of Health “on course during this period of political, social, environmental and economic crises. Budget cuts, personnel changes and the curtailment or elimination of programs were a constant problem as the state population continued to grow rapidly.” Even so, as Dr. Bigler keenly observed, the State Board of Health staff “initiated a statewide mosquito control campaign, combated epidemics of venereal disease and influenza during World War I, then plague and dengue fever shortly thereafter. They also served the homeless and helpless during three devastating hurricanes, provided essential health services during the Great Depression and established the legislative foundation for the development of county health units. It was not until the mid-1930s, when federal relief program initiatives provided essential funds and personnel that the state’s public health programs began to seriously address identified needs.”

The current Florida Department of Health provided an excellent timeline of the some key events during this era for the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year of the State Board of Health. In 1918 the influenza pandemic occurred in three waves in the United States causing over 4,000 deaths in Florida and demonstrating a greater need for county health units. In 1921 an outbreak of black plague led to the establishment of the Bureau of Epidemiology. In 1921 the first cancer clinic was established in Jacksonville for indigents with inoperable cancer. In 1922 the federal Sheppard-Towner Act provided federal matching funds to states for maternal and child health programs. In 1929 the Legislature created the important Crippled Children’s Commission from which the present Children’s Medical Services in Florida developed. In 1931 the County Health Unit Enabling Act was passed by the Florida Legislature, creating the partnership between the state and individual counties for the delivery of public health programs at the local level, and which came to be viewed up until the creation of the new Department of Health in 1996 as the most important public health legislative act since the creation of the State Board of Health in 1889. Devastating hurricanes in 1926, 1928, and 1935 resulted in the State Board of Health establishing a health mobilization program. In 1939 the Legislature adopted the State Sanitary Code. There continued to be concentration on malaria control and the eradication of hookworm through health education and basic sanitation initiated by the Bureau of Engineering. There was a massive influx of migrant construction and farm workers into Florida during this period, many of whom were called “Okies” bringing all their belongings on old vehicles they parked near their work sites creating huge sanitation problems for the state. The State Board of Health accordingly had privies and reliable water supplies required at such sites and at tourist camps.

By the end of 1932, the State Board of Health had four bureaus, Communicable Diseases, Laboratories, Engineering, and Vital Statistics, and five divisions, Public Health Nursing, Malaria Research, Malaria Control Studies, Library, and Drug Inspections. So despite serious budgetary limitations at the state level, significant funding and programs were generated by the federal government in relief of the Great Depression. Jobs and public health programs were created through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) Nursing Project, which saw Miss Ruth Mettinger rejoin the staff of the State Board of Health as the Director of the Division of Public Health Nursing in 1934. Numerous other public health programs and studies by the American Public Health Association became available, as well as funding from such other sources as the Rockefeller Foundation and Rockefeller Sanitary Commission which recommended the establishment of county health units in the southern states. The annual report of the State Board of Health for 1936 conveys the growth that resulted with the passage of Social Security legislation by the federal government that year: "The year has been principally distinguished, as in all States, by the addition of Social Security funds to the regular budget. Through the use of these funds, we have been able to establish several new and much needed services, namely, a Division of Tuberculosis Control, a Bureau of Dental Health, Bureau of Local and County Health Work, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health, and a Bureau of Public Health Education." Federal funding for public health programs in Florida and in all the other states by the U. S. Congress during this period was critically important for the health of the nation. The leadership and engagement of the U. S. Public Health Service in partnership with every state and county health department continue to be vitally essential for public health nationally and internationally.

Until the enactment of the County Health Unit Enabling Act of 1931, Chapter 154, Florida Statutes, the State Board of Health relied on a district organization, with the state divided into 5 areas. Each had a health officer, sanitation officer, a public health nurse, and a clerk. Districts usually were comprised of 12 to 15 counties. Under the Bureau of County Health Work, the State Board of Health sought through an extensive health education program to expand county health units throughout the state as recommended by Dr. George A. Dame, Sr. a district health officer who later would become the director of this important bureau. Taylor County had been the first county health unit established in September of 1930, followed by Leon in 1931 and Escambia in 1932. By the end of 1938, county health units had been established in 17 counties, and all 67 counties would have a county health unit during Dr. Sowder's tenure as State Health Officer with the last being St. Johns County in 1960.

It is interesting to note that In 1918 Stewart Gordon Thompson, Ph.D. began his long tenure as the Director of the Bureau of Vital Statistics. After hours, he also served as the first administrative officer of the Florida Medical Association with the title of Executive Secretary. In the late 1930s he left his position to become the first fulltime director of the Florida Medical Association. In 1929, the State Health Officer, Dr. Henry Hanson, called for a public health "conference" of public health workers around the state from which two years later the Florida Public Health Association (FPHA) was formally chartered with Dr. Hanson as its first President. So the importance of having the various professional associations involved in the State Board of Health and public health statewide was viewed as essential even during these early days between Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder.

As the founding President of the FPHA, Dr. Hanson was internationally known. Born in Glenwood, South Dakota in 1877 and receiving his Bachelor's degree and Master's degree in chemistry from the University of South Dakota and his M.D. from Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Hanson became the Director of the State Board of Health's Bacteriological Laboratories in 1909. Dr. Hanson joined the U.S. Army Medical Corps when the United States entered World War I. He was appointed the Chief Sanitary Inspector of the Panama Canal Zone in 1918. He was then recruited by the Peruvian government in 1919 to help with their public health crisis including yellow fever and plague. He wrote about this experience in his book *The Pied Piper of Peru: Dr. Henry Hanson's Fight against "Yellow Jack" and Bubonic Plague, 1919-1922*. After Peru, Dr. Hanson went to Columbia for the Rockefeller Foundation International Health Board and the Columbian government in the fight there against yellow fever and other tropical diseases. Dr. Hanson's wife, Jane, who stayed in Panama, died in childbirth of their third child. Devastated, Dr. Hanson pushed on with his international work for the West Africa Yellow fever Commission in Nigeria. He and his family came back to Florida in 1927 with a position in the Bureau of Communicable Diseases. As mentioned he then served two terms as State Health Officer, 1929-1935 and 1942-45. During Dr. Hanson's second term, Dr. Wilson Sowder was assigned to Pensacola by the Surgeon General of the U. S. Public Health Service to work with the Navy and civilian authorities. So Dr. Sowder knew Dr. Hanson very well and served for a short time as his assistant. Dr. Sowder said of Dr. Hanson, who passed away in Jacksonville in 1954, that "his staff and employees were devoted to him." In the pantheon of Florida State Health Officers, Dr. Henry Hanson clearly stands out during the period between Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder in which under Dr. Hanson's watch the Legislature enacted the County Health Unit Enabling Act and the FPHA was founded.

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## County Corner: Martin



With the summer season just a couple of months away, the Florida Department of Health in Martin County and Martin County Mosquito Control are urging residents to "Drain and Cover" to prevent mosquito breeding and bites.

On Saturday, April 12, the FDOH-Martin County partnered with students from Indian River State College (IRSC) to spread the word about the importance of preventing mosquito borne illness, such as dengue fever, with a door to door prevention information campaign in the Rio area.

For more information, please visit the FDOH-Martin County web site:  
[http://www.floridahealth.gov/CHD/Martin/MCHD\\_Internet\\_Site.html](http://www.floridahealth.gov/CHD/Martin/MCHD_Internet_Site.html)