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125 Years of Public Health History

Florida's Historic Capitol and the History of Florida's Public Health

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

On September 30, 2014 an exciting and impressive public health history exhibition will open in the Florida Historic Capitol Museum in Tallahassee. This exhibition celebrates the 125th Anniversary of the creation of the State Board of Health by the Legislature in its Special Session of February, 1889 that was called by Governor Francis Fleming. Over the following century and a quarter Florida's statewide public health system would come to include a cooperative partnership by the state with all of its 67 counties. Historic artifacts from the Florida Department of Health and the State Archives will be on display in the Historic Capitol Museum showing the remarkable development of public health in Florida at the state, county, and community levels.

The Historic Capitol Building itself was initially completed in 1845, the same year the Territory of Florida was admitted as the 27th state of the United States. This building has had additions over the years, and in the 1970s a much larger high rise Capitol Building was built just behind it on the same hill. Through the efforts of many important leaders and interested citizens, the 1845 Capitol Building was saved from demolition and restored to serve Florida's citizens and visitors as the Florida Historic Capitol Museum. In the original Capitol's beginning years, the Florida House of Representatives, Florida Senate, Governor, and Supreme Court were all housed there at the same time. Their chambers and offices are preserved and can be seen by all who visit the Historic Capitol Museum along with many other historical items throughout the building. The fact that Florida's history of public health will be prominently exhibited in the Historic Capitol Building, where the State Board of Health was enacted by the House and Senate, and signed into law by the Governor, 125 years ago is something truly special that all those who have labored in the fields of public health in Florida can be justly proud.

It is worth noting, that Tallahassee was chosen as the capital of Florida by the territorial governor, William Pope Duval in 1824. Florida, which had become a territory of the United States from Spain in 1821, was left by the Spanish with two capitals, St. Augustine in East Florida, and Pensacola in West Florida. The British, when Great Britain occupied Florida during the time of the American Revolutionary War, had divided the territory into East and West Florida to make the administration of the geographic distances more manageable. When Spain reacquired Florida, the Spanish kept the territory divided with two capitals. After becoming a territory of the United States in 1821, the first Legislative Council met in Pensacola in April of 1822. However, the delegates from St. Augustine had great difficulty getting there, sailing around the Straits of Florida and the Keys, and arriving in Pensacola two months late if at all. The following year in May of 1823 the Legislative Council met in St. Augustine. It took the delegates from Pensacola 28 days over land to get there. As a result, the Legislative Council's first act was to unanimously decide that future legislative meetings should be held in a more central location. Governor Duval was accordingly directed by the Legislative Council to locate a new capital for Florida on a site somewhere between the Suwannee River on the east and the Ochlockonee River on the west.

Governor Duval appointed two commissioners for this purpose: William Hayne Simmons, M.D., a St. Augustine physician, and John Lee Williams, a Pensacola lawyer. Dr. Simmons, inspired by William Bartram's late 18th century account of his expedition into Florida, moved to St. Augustine in 1821 from Charleston, South Carolina, where he was born in 1784 and served in the South Carolina Legislature. He wrote some of the first accounts of Florida's geography and descriptions of the Seminole Indians to be seen widely by others in the United States. Dr. Simmons soon experienced the ravages of yellow fever in St. Augustine, wrote about the terrible progression of this disease on individuals he treated and its impact on the entire population. As a physician, he was appointed to St. Augustine's board of health.

Mr. Williams, who was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1775, and studied law in New York's Hamilton College, practiced law in Virginia before moving to Pensacola for health reasons in 1820. There he became a community leader, explorer of Florida, and author of several books on Florida with some of its earliest maps, helping to inform others in America about this new southern territory. Mr. Williams was appointed as a commissioner to locate a new state capital because he was, as Dr. Simmons most certainly was, a prominent citizen, community leader, explorer, and author about early Florida.

Dr. Simmons and Mr. Williams agreed to meet in the fall of 1823 at St. Marks, a former Spanish port and fort just south of present day Tallahassee and now noted for its famous St. Marks Lighthouse. Dr. Simmons left St. Augustine on September 26 on horseback with two guides, reaching St. Marks two weeks later on October 10. Mr. Williams left Pensacola in a small ship, and after an exasperating journey of 24 days arrived at St. Marks on October 25, joining Dr. Simmons at a nearby farm. The weary lawyer was ready to recommend St. Marks as the state capital, but Dr. Simmons as a physician felt there was a lot of marsh in the area and that higher ground would be more sustainable and healthier.

So the two commissioners ventured north from St. Marks, coming to land occupied by the Seminole Indians. Dr. Simmons and Mr. Williams found the area hilly and beautiful. They camped near a stream with a cascade, as they wrote in their journal at the time. They soon encountered the Seminole leader, Chief Neamathla. They told Chief Neamathla that the Florida Governor had sent them on a mission to locate a new capital for Florida. The Chief reluctantly allowed them to stay but warned them not to let the other Indians know about their purpose. In searching the area the two commissioners learned that before the Seminoles, this area had been occupied by the Apalachee Indians who coexisted with the Spanish at their second most important mission in the 17th century, Mission San Luis, which the Spanish had burned and deserted in 1704 to escape an impending invasion by a force sent by the Governor of South Carolina. The Apalachee Indians, who left the area with the Spanish or migrated further westward, were planters. The remnants of their fields were still visible, and the Seminole Indians called the area where they had worked “Tallahassee” which means “old fields.”

Dr. Simmons and Mr. Williams recommended to Governor Duval a site on a prominent hill near the waterfall or “cascade” they had camped at. As the result of their recommendation, Governor Duval proclaimed Tallahassee as the state capital of Florida on March 4, 1824, and the first Legislative Council house would be built on this hill. It is where the present-day Florida Capitol Buildings, both historic and new, are located. In present day Tallahassee near the Historic Capitol Building is the new Cascades Park, which embraces the term first used by Dr. Simmons and Mr. Williams in their journal for the waterfall they found here.

21 years after Governor Duval’s proclamation, the Historic Capitol Building was built and occupied in 1845 by all three governmental branches. It would take another 44 years of dealing with yellow fever and other diseases endemic to Florida for Florida’s first state health department, the State Board of Health, to be created. This was accomplished by the Florida Legislature through the leadership of Governor Fleming and other enlightened political and medical leaders in the House and Senate, and such prominent leaders of medicine as John P. Wall, M.D. of Tampa, known as the Father of the State Board of Health., and Joseph Yates Porter, M.D. of Key West, Florida’s first State Health Officer, who would direct and build the State Board of Health during his 28 year tenure as State Health Officer from 1889 to 1917. It is most appropriate and a great honor that the dynamic legacy of Florida’s public health history will be celebrated starting on September 30th in the very building it began, Florida’s Historic Capitol.



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