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Pioneering Health Care For African-Americans

By: **Phoebe A. Pollitt**

Abstract

The story of African-American health care in Chattanooga begins in 1905, the year Dr. Emma Wheeler and her husband, Dr. John Wheeler, came to Chattanooga to set up a joint medical practice . . . At the time, Baroness Erlanger Hospital, the largest and most prestigious white hospital in Chattanooga, maintained crowded basement wards that could accommodate only a few black patients.

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Pollitt: Pioneering health care for African-Americans

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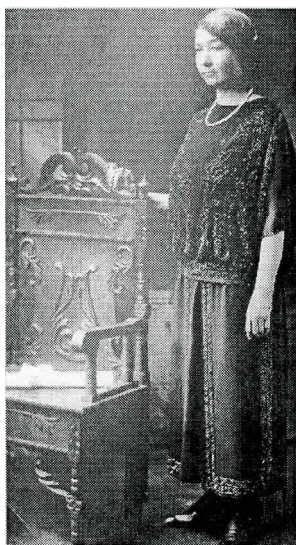


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The story of African-American health care in Chattanooga begins in 1905, the year Dr. Emma Wheeler and her husband, Dr. John Wheeler, came to Chattanooga to set up a joint medical practice. The newlyweds had just graduated from Walden University's

Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn.

At the time, Baroness Erlanger Hospital, the largest and most prestigious white hospital in Chattanooga, maintained crowded basement wards that could accommodate only a few black patients.

No hospitals in Chattanooga allowed black physicians to admit or care for patients. As a result, black physicians were often forced to operate in people's homes. Death rates were high. Most

black patients needing hospitalization had to find their way, often by horse and buggy, to Atlanta, Nashville or Knoxville. There was an obvious need for a local hospital for black patients.

In July 1915, after 10 years in practice, John and Emma Wheeler bought property at the corner of Douglas and Eighth streets and built the three-story Walden Hospital, the first such facility in Chattanooga to be owned and staffed by black Americans. It had 30 beds with nine semi-private rooms and a 12-bed ward. There were surgical, maternity and nursery departments. An average of 12 patients were treated each month. The Wheelers and three nurses made up the permanent staff. Seventeen area doctors in the African American Mountain City Medical Society had privileges to admit and care for patients. The Chattanooga Times reported:

"The completion of this hospital is a work of which the colored people feel justly proud. It will be conducted by colored people, for the benefit of colored people and will enable the colored physicians to render better service to patients needing the advantages which a hospital affords than has heretofore been possible."

In 1925, the Wheelers made two other significant contributions to the health of black Americans. Because no white local hospitals would admit black students to their nursing education programs, it was difficult to attract those nurses to Chattanooga.

Dr. Emma Wheeler responded by opening the Walden Hospital School of Nursing. She and her husband served as faculty. The program took three years to complete.

The few hospital records that existed were destroyed in a fire in the late 1940s, but the 1930 U.S. Census lists Margaret Smith as head nurse and Magdaline Staples, Calanthie Thornton, Nannie Bright, Julia E. Miller, Fannie Slaughter, Mary Jones and Georgia Duncan as student nurses.

The 1940 Census lists Louella Jenkins as head nurse and Minnie Douglas, Ophelia Humphrey and Theresa Walker as students.

The 1941 graduates were Minnie Louise Douglas and Myrtle Ophelia Humphries. Scores of other nurses were trained at the nursing school.

The Wheelers also began the Nurse Service Club in 1925. It was the first prepaid hospitalization plan in Chattanooga. Members paid 25 cents a week to the club and in exchange were guaranteed two free weeks of hospitalization and follow-up home health care by trained nurses.

While Dr. Wheeler was operating the hospital and nursing school and caring for patients, she was raising a son from her first marriage to Joseph Howard, a teacher who died of typhoid fever just before their son's birth, and two daughters, Bette and Thelma. The Wheelers also took in one of her nephews, George, and raised him as their own.

Just before World War II, the Wheelers provided physicals for black men who volunteered for service and also for men seeking employment on the many railroads that ran through Chattanooga.

Dr. John Wheeler died in 1940 while a patient in Walden Hospital. The nursing school closed around 1945, unable to

meet the new, higher standards required by the Tennessee Board of Nursing. Dr. Emma Wheeler closed the hospital because of ill health in 1952.

The Chattanooga Times praised Walden Hospital upon the opening of the newer and larger Carver Hospital serving the black community in 1947: "The Walden Hospital has stood out through the years as a beacon light and a ray of hope to the sick, wounded and afflicted."

Dr. Emma Wheeler was a member of the Mountain City Medical Society, the State Volunteer Medical Association, the board of trustees of Highland Cemetery and the Wiley Memorial Methodist Church. She was voted "Negro Mother of the Year" by the Chattanooga NAACP in 1949.

In 1957, five years after her death at age 75, a new public housing project was named in her honor.

Dr. Phoebe Pollitt serves as an associate professor in nursing at Appalachian State University. For more, visit Chattahistoricalassoc.org.