

1949

Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Society, Florida Historical (1949) "Book Review," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 28 : No. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol28/iss2/7>

BOOK REVIEW

A Century of Medicine in Jacksonville and Duval County by Webster Merritt, M.D. (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1949. xii, 201 pp. Illustrations, map, bibliography, index. \$3.50).

This is a highly readable and authentic narrative of people, conditions, and happenings which cover a far larger subject-field than the title indicates. Also it is more than local history, for during a good part of the century Jacksonville was the metropolis of and the gateway to Florida. It is a history, too, of more than medicine, for the family doctor had not even begun to lose his place as family friend at the end of the century, hence it tells much about the people and what they did.

Physicians are often the leaders of a community-taking a large part in public organizations and movements, and several of those who come most often into Dr. Merritt's story were especially active in community and even State affairs.

Beginning with the arrival of Dr. James Hall who settled near Cowford, the present Jacksonville, before the year 1800, the narrative is told chronologically, and the physicians and events come on the scene year by year as the region is settled. Dr. Hall was likely the first American physician to practice anywhere in Florida for any length of time, and for nearly four decades he was the only general practitioner in the Jacksonville region. A year after his death in 1837 his successor arrived with his bride-Dr. Abel Seymour Baldwin, "destined to become not only the town's greatest physician but for many years its most outstanding citizen." He was prominent as well in regional and State affairs, in promoting Jacksonville as a port, in the building of a railroad to Lake City, completed in 1860, and as a member of the Florida Legislature.

The next arrivals were Dr. Henry A. Holland who was an extensive planter also, and Dr. Charles Byrne, an editor also of the *Florida News*.

Diseases and epidemics were frequent and severe

in the early days, and the author through extensive research is able to tell much of each one.

About midcentury malaria was especially prevalent, followed by smallpox in 1852. But 1854 was to be "a year of fire, sickness and sorrow" with smallpox and scarlet fever.

Yet none of these, nor all of them together, equalled yellow fever in devastation. The epidemics of 1857 and 1877 were severe, but that of 1888 became the traditional example throughout the country of severity, calamity, panic, flight and decimation; as well as unselfishness, charity, and general humanitarianism. Many citizens remained to nurse the sick who could easily have fled, and some of these gave their lives also. Within a month after the outbreak the population was reduced from 20,000 to 14,000, of whom only 4,000 were white; and at the end nearly 5,000 had had the disease and there had been more than 400 deaths, with nearly 1,000 new cases and seventy deaths in a single week. The epidemic was famous also for its shotgun quarantine, bonfires to purify the air, the firing of cannon to kill the germs by concussion, the refugee camps, and the noble work and notable success of the Jacksonville Sanitary Association. This organization of men and women who stayed behind to carry on received contributions from cities and communities in forty-two states and several foreign countries amounting to more than \$300,000, without which the destitution and suffering would have been appalling, for there was no Red Cross to come to the rescue of the stricken and stagnant town.

While this epidemic is the most moving chapter in the book, there are numerous other episodes of interest. The forty-four illustrations, brought together from many sources and largely reproduced from contemporaneous photographs, bring the people and events to life; and as all statements are fully documented the authenticity of the work throughout is unquestionable.