

Owen, John Fletcher ^[1]

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Owen, John Fletcher

by [C. Sylvester Green](#) ^[2], 1991

30 May 1895–10 Mar. 1976

John Fletcher Owen, psychiatrist, was born in [Sampson County](#) ^[3], near Roseboro, the son of John Fletcher and Eugenia Herring Owen. Both his parents died before he was nine, and he made his home with his mother's sister, Elizabeth Herring (Mrs. E. J.) Crumpler in Roseboro. After attending the local schools, Owen went to [Wake Forest College](#) ^[4], where he received the degree of bachelor of science in medicine in 1918. In the fall of that year he enrolled in the third-year class of the Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, from which he was graduated with the degree of doctor of medicine in psychiatry in 1920.

During the next six years, Owen served an internship at Bryn Mawr (Pa.) Hospital, specialized in neuro-psychiatry in field assignments with the [U.S. Public Health Service](#) ^[5], and completed a one-year residency at Cook County Hospital, Chicago, with an additional six months in Philadelphia and eighteen months at Cherry Point, Md. He then served successive residencies at the Chicago State Hospital and the State Hospital of Massachusetts at Medfield. These special residencies provided further training and research in his branch of medicine, even then comparatively new. Reportedly, all seven of these institutions offered him a permanent staff appointment, but he chose to return to North Carolina, where he joined the staff of the [Dorothea Dix Hospital](#) ^[6], the state hospital of North Carolina at Raleigh, in the summer of 1926. Within a few years Owen, in addition to maintaining his heavy schedule of staff duties, became associate superintendent of the hospital. He served in that capacity until 18 Aug. 1942, when he was named superintendent, succeeding Dr. Julian W. Ashley, who retired.

Three years later, Owen elected to enter private practice in Raleigh (1945–58). At age sixty-two, he became head of the Psychiatric Hospital Unit of North Carolina [Central Prison](#) ^[7], Raleigh. He remained in the post until his retirement in 1973.

His search for knowledge sent Owen to law school in the 1930s (he had originally wanted to be a lawyer). After attending night classes for several years, he passed the bar examination in 1939. He never practiced law but had the unique dual background of medicine and law to guide him in his use of psychiatry in correctional institutions.

Dr. Owen was one of the few physicians certified by the American Board of Psychiatry. At the time of his selection to the top post at Dorothea Dix, it was written of him: "He is well qualified for his work and is one of the outstanding psychiatrists in the South. . . . He has taken many postgraduate courses and kept consistently up to date with the treatment of the mentally sick. He contributes regularly to the *North Carolina Medical Journal*." His abstracts of medicolegal articles were widely printed.

A profile of Owen, produced by feature writer Ann Pelham, appeared in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on 2 June 1975. It is a sensitive, revealing portrait of an innovative pioneer in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. The piece focuses on the motivations of a well-trained, modest—even shy—individual who always worked hard, delved into new fields of learning, and counted himself happiest when he was helping those who had been neglected and untreated largely because of the lack of knowledge and impetus in the treatment of the mentally ill. Unquestionably, Owen's forty-four years in psychiatric practice in North Carolina did much to magnify and stabilize this branch of medical science.

During his retirement, Owen learned Italian and Spanish—"just for the enjoyment"—and read current magazine articles and books dealing with medicine and law. In the summer of 1974 he suffered a detached retina and resorted to listening to cassettes of both language lessons and published articles. He had a real talent for music and enjoyed playing the organ at his home on Fairview Road in Raleigh.

Owen married Mary Harrison. He died at his Raleigh home. A funeral service was held at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, with interment in [Oakwood Cemetery](#) ^[8], Raleigh.

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