

Register, Frank Murchison ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1994

6 Aug. 1870–28 Sept. 1939

Frank Murchison Register, physician and public health officer, was born in Cumberland County ^[2], one of ten children of Robert and Mary McDuffie Register. Reared in Moore County ^[3], he was educated at the John E. Kelly subscription school. He then attended the medical school at Davidson, a separate institution from the college but sharing some of the same facilities and faculty. Register also took courses at Davidson College ^[4] itself and is considered an alumnus of the class that matriculated in 1889. The medical school offered a two-year program in his day, but shortly after his departure it was expanded to three years and incorporated in 1893 as the North Carolina Medical College. Register then took courses at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Baltimore (later expanded to the Medical School of the University of Maryland ^[5]) and attended the Kentucky School of Medicine ^[6], Louisville, where he obtained an M.D. degree in 1893.

On returning to North Carolina, Register was involved in general practice in several locations for ten years. In 1902, however, he accepted a position as prison doctor at the Caledonia State Prison Farm, in Halifax County ^[7], where his father-in-law, James Henry Durham, had recently become superintendent of the North Carolina Lumber Company at nearby Tillery. Register remained at Caledonia for fifteen years and for a number of years also served as county coroner. In 1917 the General Assembly ^[8] passed legislation permitting the flogging of prisoners with the proviso that the whipping be done in the presence of the prison doctor. Register disapproved of this form of punishment, refused to comply with the regulation, and resigned his post at Caledonia. His action attracted favorable statewide attention, but the law remained in effect until 1925.

Almost immediately, in July 1917, Register was employed as the first full-time county health officer in Northampton County ^[9], across the Roanoke River ^[10] from Halifax, thus becoming one of a handful of county health officers in the entire state. In public health work he found his true calling. With a flair for innovation, Register undertook to educate the populace of the county in regard to sanitation, at the time poorly understood in rural North Carolina. So successful were his efforts that typhoid fever, which had been an annual scourge, was controlled and in the following year, not a single case was reported.

Because Register's work in Northampton County attracted statewide and even national notice, he was elected to head the Bureau of Vital Statistics of the State Board of Health and moved to Raleigh ^[11]. Although he made an excellent record in this position, he was removed in 1930 after eleven years of service when the Federal Census Bureau, with which the State Board of Health cooperated, insisted that the state directors possess special training that he did not have. From Raleigh, Register moved to Wayne County ^[12], where he was public health officer for three years. In 1933 the position of superintendent of the Caswell Training School for the Feeble Minded became vacant, and he accepted the job, for which he was admirably suited in light of his patience, understanding, and kindly disposition. Here he remained until his death six years later.

Dr. Benjamin Washburn, a member of the Rockefeller Foundation when it did much to eradicate endemic diseases in the South, considered Register to have been one of the most successful health officers who took part in the early North Carolina work.

In 1890 Register married Lula Maurer of Ashland, Pa.; she died shortly after their marriage. In 1892 he married Mabel Durham of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. There were no children by either marriage, but he and his second wife adopted a son, Burton S. Sellers, of Raleigh. Active in the Presbyterian church, Dr. Register was a member of several medical societies. He died in Kinston ^[13] and was buried in Montlawn Cemetery, Raleigh.

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