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John Perry Wall

A Man for All Seasons

By JAMES M. INGRAM, M.D.*

A current Broadway play recreates the incredibly versatile career of Cardinal Thomas Woolsey in the Royal Court of Elizabethan England. The play's title, "A Man for All Seasons", is singularly apt for its subject, and is equally descriptive of the life of John Perry Wall - Tampa's most versatile physician.

The circumstances of his birth portended that he was to be no ordinary man. John Wall was born while his family was "under siege by the Seminole Indians" on September 17, 1836, just south of the St. Mary's River, near present day Jasper, Florida. His parents, Mary H. and Perry Wall, were pioneers, migrating southward by wagon train from Georgia into Territorial Florida during the Second Seminole War.

The Wall family settled on a homestead near the site of the attack, and lived there for nine years. In 1845, lured by generous land grants of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, the family again moved southward to establish and defend a homestead in the highlands of Hernando County, just north of Brooksville. Statehood was achieved by Florida that same year, amid continuing Seminole hostilities.

"Chinsegut Hill"

In these surroundings the family prospered, eventually building their estate, which was later called "Chinsegut Hill." This beautiful and perfectly "preserved mid-century Florida mansion still dominates the rolling countryside from its highest point, and is now a biological experiment station for the University of South Florida.

Young John Wall received his early education in the local schools and aspired to practice the law; however, his father contended that medicine was "a more congenial and profitable" profession.¹ His father's wish was dutifully honored, but the son's subsequent life was to evolve into a curious milieu of medicine, law, journalism and politics. He was graduated from the Medical College of South Carolina in 1858, returning to Florida only briefly before the outbreak of the Civil War. Volunteering as a Surgeon, he was assigned to Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, which served the Florida troops in the Virginia area. While there, he returned briefly to Brooksville and married nineteen year old Pressie Eubanks, daughter of a wealthy planter, and took her back to Richmond for about a year.

Dr. Wall's daily log book of his years as a Confederate Surgeon, written in fine, delicate longhand, is preserved in Bradenton by his family. In addition to many medical descriptions, it provides a vivid picture of life in wartime Richmond. It also gives firsthand accounts of the tragic explosion of the Richmond Arsenal and of the construction of the first ironclad warships of the Confederacy.² Unfortunately for the historian, many pages of the journal portray only the anguish of a lovesick bridegroom, lamenting the paucity of letters from "my own sweet, dear, darling, precious Pressie" and pouring vitriolic abuse on the plodding postal service of the

Confederacy. Chafing under hospital routine and the military discipline of the nearby Surgeon-General, Dr. Wall requested and was assigned duty with troops. He first served with the Eighth and then later with the Fifth Florida Battalion, ending the war as a Major in the Fifth Battalion stationed in Florida.

Moves to Tampa

After practicing briefly in Brooksville, Dr. Wall and his family moved in 1869 to Tampa, an isolated, unpolished, cattle-shipping port of 1,500 inhabitants. Here, in the course of a busy practice in 1871, he boarded the steamer H. M. Cool from Cedar Key, to treat a cabin boy critically ill with yellow fever. The cabin boy recovered, but Dr. Wall contracted the disease. From him it was carried to his family, and within a few days both his wife Pressie and their two year old daughter had died of the fever. This tragedy and the events that followed were to affect his life profoundly.

Already interested in communicable disease and problems of public health, he now devoted most of his time to the study of yellow fever. By 1873 he had reached the firm conclusion that yellow fever was carried by the mosquito, almost certainly, he thought, by the far-ranging "treetop mosquito," later to be identified as the *Aedes aegypti*.³ Without prior knowledge of the vector or virus, he came to this conclusion by three observations: (1) Both the mosquito and the disease

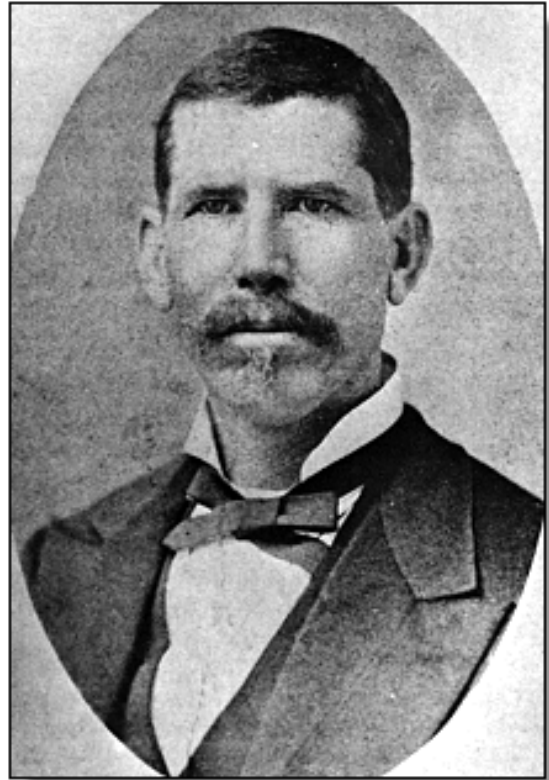


Photo from Hampton Dunn Collection

Chinsegut Hill, estate of Dr. Wall's family, built about 1850 on the highest point of land just north of Brooksville, is now a biological experiment station of the University of South Florida.

were prevalent in the summer months and both disappeared with the first frost. (2) Adults whose work did not take them outside at night, when mosquitoes were most numerous, were rarely infected. (3) Children, who were generally kept in at night, with the exception of children of doctors and nurses, were usually spared.

He was the first American to make these remarkably accurate observations and, conclusion. The mosquito had been incriminated as a vector by Daniel S. Beauderthuy, a native of Guadeloupe who settled in Venezuela, in 1854, but he had considered yellow fever a variety of malaria. Because of this basic error, his work had received little attention. It is not known whether or not Dr. Wall was aware of Beauderthuy's work. This was never mentioned in Wall's prolific writing on yellow fever, though he was generous in recognizing the work of others. For his conclusions on the mosquito, Wall received nothing but ridicule from the medical profession and especially from the lay press. The sanitarians held sway for more than two decades, and the most widely accepted opinion was that yellow fever would disappear with the elimination of filth. It was not until Carlos Findlay's proclamation in Cuba in 1881 against the mosquito, and later Walter Reed's final proof in 1900, that Dr. Wall's early conclusion was accepted. During this period, Wall, as health officer, had maintained yellow fever in Tampa to a notable minimum by mosquito protection alone.⁴



Photograph of Dr. Wall in 1874, at age 38.
Photo from Hampton Dunn Collection

A 'Hell-Raiser'

Throughout his adult life, Dr. Wall had suffered one regrettable weakness, a progressive overindulgence in alcohol. Even by the loose moral code of a frontier town, he was known as "a hard drinker and a Hell-raiser." The death of his beloved wife and daughter only increased this problem. Nevertheless, by 1872 he had successfully courted Miss Matilda McKay, the chaste and lovely daughter of Captain James McKay, a prominent shipmaster and exporter. Small wonder that when Dr. Wall approached the venerable Captain, asking for his daughter's hand, he was met first with stunned silence, then violent refusal. Given quickly to understand that the problem was his alcoholism alone, Dr. Wall swore never again to touch another drop if Miss Matilda would be his. In the face of direst predictions, and weathering provocative tests in which he was surreptitiously offered his favorite poison, Mint Juleps, by his doubting sister, Julia, he rejected alcohol completely. The couple was married, and to the best knowledge of every historian,⁵ his oath was never broken. He accomplished a one day cure of alcoholism, a rare and difficult feat in any age.

In this forthright decision, Dr. Wall shared in the strong personal characteristics of his entire family. His sister, Julia Wall Friebele attracted only moderate notice in her simultaneous roles as pillar of the Methodist Church and a chain smoker of the finest Havana cigars. His brother, Joseph Baisden Wall, was a state's attorney, and later a judge and state senator. One day, during a brief trial recess, he stepped outside the front door of the courthouse, which now is the site of the Marine Bank. He noticed that the lynching of a white man was in progress under a large oak tree, known locally as the "Hangin' Tree," on present day Kennedy Boulevard. Observing that the members of the mob were unable to properly fashion a hangman's noose on the end of the rope, Joe strolled over and accommodatingly and expertly tied the knot, then returned to his duties in the courtroom.⁵ Personalities in the Wall clan did not lack for color.

Addresses A.M.A.

At this point, probably aided by his abstinence, the most varied and productive period of Dr. Wall's life began. His photograph around 1875 shows him to be slim, wiry, and of medium height, with sandy hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. He was quick of motion and speech, and his alert gaze reflected his energy and wits.

As Health Officer of Tampa, his chief interest and concern remained in the field of communicable disease. In November, 1875, then a delegate to the American Medical Association meeting in Baltimore, he delivered one of the major addresses. It was entitled "Climatological and Sanitary Report of Florida",⁶ a curious subject indeed by modern standards for presentation to such an audience. Yet, the Civil War was only ten years past, and Florida, with a population of only 187,000, was largely a vast wilderness which no one seemed able or inclined to use. Employing a remarkably broad vocabulary, Wall described the advantages of the topography, water supply, and climate.

Together with Dr. Abel Baldwin,⁷ Wall gave the first proof, by extensive temperature observations, that the, summers as well as the winters were milder in Florida than farther north on the continent. The paper received wide recognition and was reprinted in several medical and popular publications. The subtle blend of scientific fact and hard-sell pitch for tourism and real estate, used by both Wall and Baldwin, would have warmed the heart of any Chamber of Commerce of today.

In the same year, 1875, Dr. Wall attended the second meeting of the year-old Florida Medical Association, representing the "South Florida Medical Society" and presenting a paper on epidemic disease.⁸

An occasional glimpse of Dr. Wall's everpresent and often acid wit appears in the history of these days. When asked by a relative why he had become an Episcopalian instead of remaining in the Baptist or Methodist church of his family, he dryly replied, "I joined the Episcopal Church because it doesn't interfere with either my politics or my religion."⁵

What Florida Needs

Writing in his favorite sounding board, The Semi-Tropical,⁹ Dr. Wall displayed great foresight for the state. In his article entitled "Southwest Florida", also in 1875, he enumerated Florida's chief needs: people for immigration, investment capital, disease control, harbor channels, land drainage, roads and railroads. On his own, he mapped out the exact routes used today by almost

every modern rail line and major highway. His impatience with the delay in developing railroads and mail service to the West Coast was recorded with a bitter pen. His estimation of land use and land values of the various regions was extremely accurate, except for his opinion that the area from Bradenton south to the Florida Keys would never be "fit for anything else but grazing cattle."

During these years the Wall family occupied a house on the half block now occupied by the Tampa Terrace Hotel and the Tampa Federal Savings and Loan Bank. This plot, bounded by present day Kennedy Boulevard, Florida Avenue and Madison Street, contained the home, a large stable, and a separate office building for Dr. Wall. From this office, he carried on a very active private practice for over twenty years, a background easily overlooked among his many accomplishments. The only surviving child of his first marriage to Pressie Eubanks was John P. Wall, Jr. who grew up in this home, was educated as a lawyer, and practiced all of his life in Tampa. Of the children born to Matilda McKay Wall, only one, Charley Wall, survived. He was to become one of Tampa's most colorful citizens.

Dr. Wall was asked to deliver the "Annual Oration," on the subject of his choice, to the Florida Medical Association Meeting of 1877. This address, covering many aspects of medical practice, gives, perhaps more than any other the deepest insight into his character and the best cross section of medical knowledge of his era. It was certainly no whitewash of the profession. Wall held low regard for most medical therapy, particularly the value of the drugs then available.¹⁰ "Our stock of positive knowledge, as to the effect of drugs, is really much smaller than our professional vanity may be willing to confess. Is there any evidence that the average duration of life has been lengthened by our superior skill in the treatment of disease? On the other hand, is there not considerable ground for the belief that thousands of lives have been sacrificed by the exhibition of our remedies?"

Cites Medical Advances

He deplored the lack of scientific approach in evaluating therapy of all kinds and urged his colleagues "to glean the small grain of truth from the abundance of chaffy errors." He considered the prospect of preventing diseases far more promising, claiming that "we are much better prepared to exercise our knowledge in their prevention than their cure." The physician's image, as seen from the patient's eye, he found a bit too bright: "the truth is, the public faith in us as physicians far exceeds our ability - a fact whose recognition on our part. . . is likely to do more good for the advancement of the science of medicine than all of our boasted medical erudition."

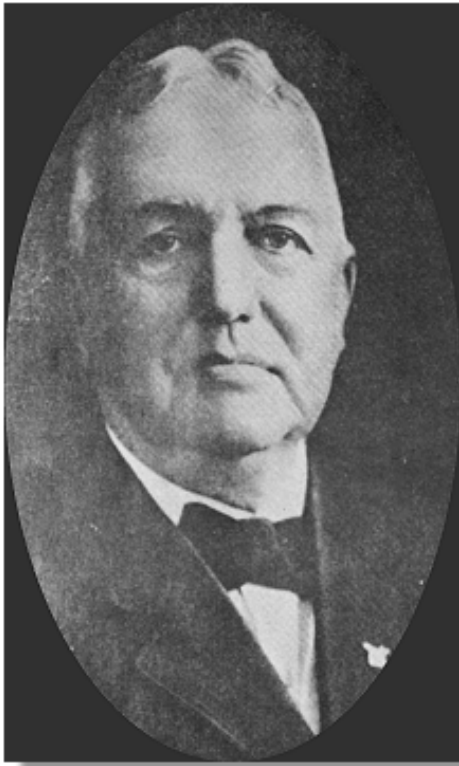
On the positive side, he was fascinated by the possibilities of several new developments, particularly the recent use of the thermometer for the accurate measurement of fever. He lauded the perfection of "the hypodermic administration of remedies as another advance in practice, little if any, inferior to the use of anesthesia in surgery." He considered two new gadgets, the ophthalmoscope and laryngoscope, to have some promise. The greatest advance in surgery, he thought, was "the practice and teachings of Mr. Lister in the use of antiseptic dressings which strengthen the probability of correctness of the germ theory in the causation of disease."

Now his activities began to increase in scope and momentum. He became associate editor of the Sunland Tribune, predecessor of the present Tampa Tribune, in 1878, writing chiefly for his own

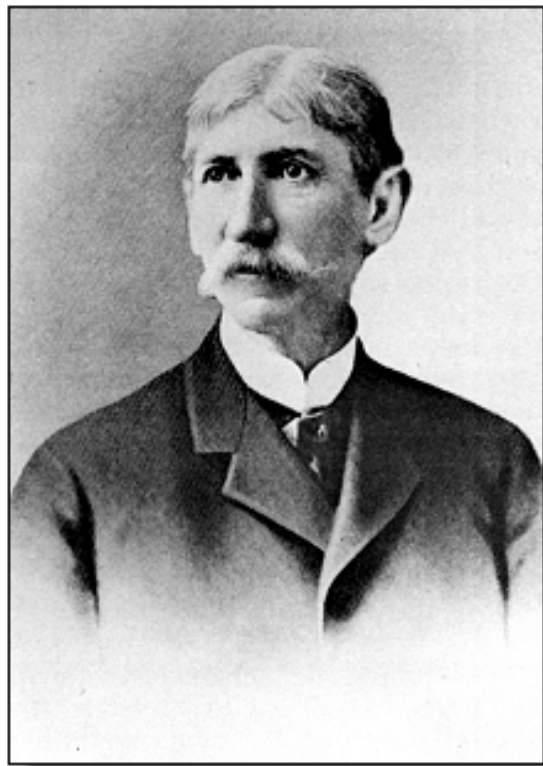
amusement in the editorial pages. He delighted in controversy, and usually had arguments in progress with several other papers in the state. Dr. Wall so infuriated Colonel Frank Harris, editor and owner of the Ocala Banner, that the colonel challenged him to fight a duel. The challenge was accepted, but Dr. Wall stated that under the code, as the challenged party, he had the right to name the place and weapons for the encounter. He named Mrs. Bunch's Cowpens, near the Tampa slaughter pens on Six Mile Creek, as the place and shovels as the weapons. The state roared with laughter - and no more was heard of the duel.⁵

Mayor of Tampa

Later, as editor of the Sunland Tribune, Dr. Wall wielded his editorial scalpel on H. A. Crane, a former Confederate quisling, and later editor of Key of the Gulf, in Florida's largest town, Key West. Making a play of Crane's name, Wall called him "Old Yellow Legs" and the nickname remained with him until his death.⁵



JOSEPH Y. PORTER, M.D.
First State Health Officer, 1889-1917



GOV. FRANCIS P. FLEMING
Brother A Yellow Fever Victim

Photos from Hampton Dunn Collection

From 1878 to 1880, Dr. Wall served as mayor of Tampa, concentrating particularly on increasing the maritime trade of the city. His portrait hangs appropriately in the City Hall among the mayors, rather than with his colleagues in the Medical Library. On completion of his term, he founded the Tampa Board of Trade, later the Chamber of Commerce, and became its first president. Here he was a strong leader in Tampa's three most important commercial developments. First was the construction in 1883 of the railroad from northeastern Florida to Tampa by



This hand-engraved memorial resolution was presented by the Florida State Medical Association to Dr. Wall's family. It now hangs in Tampa General Hospital.



Sand Hills Hospital, near Jacksonville, was used for the isolation of yellow fever patients during the epidemic of 1888.

H. B. Plant. The second was the settlement by Vicente Martinez Ybor and a large colony of Cuban and Spanish cigar makers in an area east of the city, which is now Ybor City. Third was the development of the phosphate industry, which began with the discovery of phosphate in the mouth of the Hillsborough River¹¹ during the deepening of the channel by the government dredge Alabama in 1883. These accomplishments, together with his unending efforts to deepen the ship channel from Tampa to the Gulf, resulted in a marked similarity between the overlapping lives of Dr. Wall and Dr. Abel Baldwin of Jacksonville.¹²

The year 1885 found Wall at the zenith of his multifaceted activities. In a single year he served as President of the Florida Medical Association, a representative in the state legislature, and a delegate to the Third Constitutional Convention of Florida. On the floor of this convention, after years of unsuccessful effort, he led the final campaign to establish, in the state constitution, provisions for a state Board of Health. His most often quoted speech was an almost identical one presented before both the medical society and the convention. "The duty of preserving the health and lives of its citizens from the causes of disease is as incumbent on the state as that of suppressing rapine and murder ... One has no adequate conception of how much sickness and consequently death, are preventable ... The time is surely coming when preventative medicine shall have reached such a degree of perfection that the occurrence of epidemic disease will be felt as a gross reproach to the community which it assails."¹³

Yellow Fever Problem

The Board of Health was authorized by the convention of 1885, but was not actually created because of the lack of money. The legislature of 1887 chose to ignore its constitution. Thus was perpetuated the system of individual community health control begun by the first Territorial Governor, Andrew Jackson, in 1821, when he created a Board of Health in the first ordinance governing his new headquarters of Pensacola. Subsequently, it had been the desire of each community to establish its own health authorities, regulation, and methods. As transportation improved, yellow fever increased to become the state's major health problem and its greatest barrier to economic progress. Epidemics appeared almost every summer in coastal towns in spite of constant pleading by Wall and others for statewide regulation. Only the infamous "shotgun quarantine" by volunteer citizen-guards kept the fever out of inland communities.¹⁴ Finally, when medical problems became political issues, Dr. Wall's most cherished dream was accomplished. During the gubernatorial campaign of 1888, the most severe yellow fever epidemic yet to appear swept through the state. The candidates, led by democratic nominee Francis P. Fleming of Jacksonville, were presented by individual community quarantine, enforced by shotgun from campaigning in many counties. A few days before the November election, which was won by Fleming, his brother, attorney Lewis I. Fleming, died of yellow fever in Jacksonville. Political and public sentiment was at a peak, and Dr. Wall relentlessly pressed the governor-elect for action.

Immediately after his inauguration in February, 1889, Fleming called Florida's first special session of the legislature. There could be no delay until the regular session in the summer, for fear that the epidemic would return. Despite considerable opposition, a State Board of Health was established and financed, and severe penalty was set up for violation of quarantine and other health laws. Dr. Wall's one-man crusade of fifteen years was now successful. He was recognized, both immediately and to the present time, as the "father of the State Board of Health."

"Far Ahead of His Time"

His close friend, wealthy and energetic Dr. Joseph Y. Porter, was appointed the first State Health Officer, his first of seven productive and distinguished terms. Dr. Porter later wrote of Wall in his history of the State Board of Health "this ... stands as a lasting memorial to a man (Dr. Wall) of superior mental attainments and who, far ahead of his time, was looking forward to the future welfare and commercial prosperity of his state."¹⁵

Victory in the Legislature did not slow the frantic pace of Wall's life. He returned to Tampa to enter still another civic controversy. Henry B. Plant, having completed his railroad five years earlier, was embarking on his most grandiose and least practical venture. On the west bank of the Hillsborough River, he was laying out the foundation of a huge, almost unbelievable, Moorish castle, over two blocks long, and to be topped by 13 silver towers or minarets. It was to be the Tampa Bay Hotel, the epitome of subtropical resorts. But to the natives, it would have looked far more at home in Arabian Nights than among the sand-choked streets of Tampa. When the projected size and luxury of the new hotel were compared with that of the town, it appeared to them to be a clear case of the tail which would wag the dog. Popular sentiment was that of amusement and skepticism. Fearing that public ridicule might prevent the erection of this opulent oasis in the wilderness, Wall and other members of the Board of Trade exerted every effort to

defend and support the hotel. It was completed, and was a monumental financial flop; but it made Mr. and Mrs. Plant happy, brought the rich and famous to town, created the most distinctive feature of Tampa's skyline, and eventually provided a campus for the University of Tampa.¹⁶

Weds Third Time

In October, 1893, Dr. Wall, by then an authority on yellow fever, was called by the Surgeon-General of the United States to consult in the management of yellow fever at the Maritime Hospital in Brunswick, Georgia. While there, he was summoned home because of the illness of his wife Matilda. He arrived only a few days prior to her death in November, 1893. Six months later he followed his father's example and took a third wife, marrying Miss Louisa Williams of Virginia in May, 1894. There were no children from this brief marriage.

At the annual meeting of the Florida Medical Association on April 18, 1895, Dr. Wall was invited again to be the guest speaker. The meeting was held in the hall of the East Florida Seminary, forerunner of the University of Florida, at Gainesville. An eyewitness account of the evening session is preserved in the Proceedings of the Florida Medical Association:¹⁷ "Dr. Wall entering the hall, and it being a few minutes of the hour set apart for the consideration of his paper, the order of business was suspended, and to a very marked attention on the part of his confreres, the gentleman commenced reading his paper on 'Public Hygiene in the Light of Recent Observations and Experiments.' It was observed that he read with great difficulty and under suppressed excitement, the stress under which he seemed to labor being so great at times as to cause him repeatedly to pause and to sip water." Even then, his sense of humor did not fail. With the quip that "high tones and toney meals do not seem to agree with me," he tried to continue. "He had proceeded but a short distance, but eight or nine minutes having elapsed since he entered the hall, when he reeled and fell, striking the floor . . ." He was dead before the presiding officer could reach him. Though likely due to coronary occlusion, the exact cause of his death was never established.

"Nature's Nobleman"

It was an age when public mourning was emotional and effusive; when journalism was florid, laschrymose and unabashed. A special train of three cars, draped in black and carrying an escort of over twenty medical leaders, carried his body back to Tampa. Along the hundred mile route, the engine whistle sounded long mournful blasts at regular intervals, a signal ordinarily employed during the winter to warn citrus growers of a freeze moving down from the North. In tribute, all businesses in Tampa closed for two days after the train's arrival.³

Newspapers of the state, even the Ocala Banner, competed in paying him eulogy. His own Sunland Tribune apparently felt no impropriety in describing the details of his widow's grief, or the features of his embalmed body and its good state of preservation. The Tribune hailed Dr. Wall as "a learned physician, a ripe scholar, a magnanimous man, a true friend of the poor, and one of nature's noblemen."¹⁸ The memorial resolution passed by the Florida Medical Association on the day after his death was inscribed on a window-sized wall plaque, elaborately hand-lettered and decorated, and containing his portrait. This plaque now hangs in Tampa General Hospital, a gift from his descendants.

Today Dr. Wall's grave may be found in small, historic, century-old Oak lawn Cemetery, a half block island of cedar-shaded tranquility in the heart of busy Tampa. The quiet scene provides placid contrast with the hurried pace of Dr. Wall's life. He was physician, scientist, naturalist, industrialist, journalist, politician, humorist and crusader.

He was a man for all seasons.

Grateful acknowledgment for aid in preparation of this biographic sketch is given to James E. Wall, Jr., and Herbert G. McKay, both descendants of Dr. Wall., and to historian-journalist Hampton Dunn, all of Tampa.

**Presented before the Hillsborough County Medical Association, Tampa, May 3, 1966.*



JAMES M. INGRAM, M.D.

About the Author

JAMES M. INGRAM, M.D.

James Mayhew Ingram is a native of Tampa and was graduated from Hillsborough High School in 1937. He attended the University of Tampa and Duke University. He was graduated from Duke University Medical Center in 1943 and interned at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1944. He served in the Army and was assigned to Walter Reed General Hospital and Rodriguez General Hospital in Puerto Rico. He was in private practice in Tampa from 1951 to 1970, and served on the faculty of the College of Medicine at the University of Florida from 1962-70. Dr. Ingram was professor and chairman of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology at the College of Medicine, University of South Florida from 1970 to present. His hobby is medical history and he is a frequent contributor of articles on the subject to the Journal of the Florida Medical Association. His article on Dr. Wall was published in the Journal.

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