

HEALTH EQUITY

Segregated Health Care

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:18 Between 1903 and 1913 three hospitals opened in St. Petersburg and none of them would care for African Americans. In July 1913, the old Samaritan Hospital was moved to a new site to serve the black community. There were no doctors on staff and a handful of nurses provided treatment primarily to patients with communicable diseases earning the facility the name of Pest House. In 1923, the 3500 square foot Mercy Hospital opened and in 1926, Dr. James Maxie Ponder became the first black staff physician.

:56 Dr. Ponder and his family, wife, Fannie Ayer Ponder, and son, Ernest moved here from Ocala, Florida in 1926 and finally, Mercy Hospital had its first black physician. He was the only black staff physician for more than 10 years. In 1940, Dr. Breaux Martin moved to St. Petersburg, opened a medical office and joined the staff at Mercy Hospital becoming the hospital's second black staff physician. Two of his sons were born at Mercy. Tired of the restrictions of Jim Crow, Dr. Martin moved to Toledo, Ohio in 1949.

Dr. Orion T. Ayer, Sr., filled the void left by Dr. Martin's departure. He arrived with his wife, Helen, and his three children in 1949 and provided medical care for the community for more than 35 years. Dr. Fred W. Alsup opened his private practice and joined the Mercy Hospital staff in 1950. With his arrival, Mercy Hospital now had three doctors on staff. Dr. Alsup was also one of the pioneer civil rights activists in our community who fought against the segregated conditions in the hospital and the city at large. Dr. Ponder retired as city physician to the black community in 1951 and over the next few years, three more physicians joined the Mercy Hospital staff. Drs. Wimbish, Rose, and Taliaferro.

In 1951, Dr. Wimbish established a practice in Tampa and built a home, which was burned by arsonists. He moved his family to St. Petersburg, joined the staff at Mercy Hospital and was named assistant city physician. In 1953, Dr. Eugene Rose joined the Mercy staff. He cared for Dr. Alsup's patients when he was recalled to the military from 1953 until 1955. Dr. Harry F. Taliaferro was the last black physician to join Mercy's staff. He originally established his practice in Clearwater but later moved to St. Petersburg.

3:40 Other staff at Mercy Hospital included a cadre of trained nurses who assisted the physicians in providing essential and quality medical care. And gray ladies, volunteers who performed non-medical tasks freeing nurses for other duties. Healthcare workers at Mercy Hospital struggled to make use of outdated equipment discarded from Mound Park, faced overcrowding and had no pharmacy and no laboratory. For nearly 40 years, Mercy Hospital was the only hospital in the city that treated and cared for African Americans.



4:13 On February 23, 1961, in a private meeting, a decision was made to integrate Mound Park Hospital. Two days later on February 25, 1961, Dr. Fred Alsup admitted Mrs. Altamease Chapman to Mound Park Hospital, now Bay Front Medical Center, effectively desegregating the whites only hospital. In 1966, Mercy Hospital transferred the last of its patients and staff to Mound Park and after 43 years, closed its doors. Dr. Ponder, Mercy's first black physician, died on March 4, 1958. It is said that he wrote the first prescription for Webb's Drug Store. When Dr. Ponder died in 1958, the flag at City Hall was flown at half staff during his funeral and a bronze plaque was placed in his memory in a new wing of Bay Front Medical Center.

