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## Emma Rochelle Wheeler biographical sketch

Kirsten Layne

xwx152@mocs.utc.edu

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# Emma Rochelle Wheeler

Written by Kirsten Layne.

Emma Rochelle Wheeler, an African American physician, was born in near Gainesville, Florida in 1892. Her visit to a white female doctor was such a positive experience that it inspired Wheeler to become a doctor. Wheeler attended Cookman Institute in Jacksonville Florida to further her education and later married Joseph R. Howard. However, only a year after they had married, Howard died of typhoid fever. Wheeler gave birth to a son after her husband's death and named him Joseph Howard.<sup>1</sup> As a single mother, she completed medical school in 1905. After graduation, Wheeler moved to Nashville, Tennessee to continue her study at Walden University's Meharry Medical College where Wheeler was only one of three female students out of the total sixty-eight students.<sup>2</sup>

Later Wheeler married Dr. John Wheeler and moved to Chattanooga Tennessee and established Walden Hospital.<sup>3</sup> Walden Hospital was the first hospital in Chattanooga for African Americans when Erlanger barred them during the Jim Crow era.<sup>4</sup> Wheeler also founded the Nurse Service Club of Chattanooga which was a "pre-paid hospitalization plan" a precursor to modern-day insurance and was "the only of its kind here" in Chattanooga.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Wheeler's husband admitted that Walden hospital "was managed, operated, and paid for by Dr. Emma R. Wheeler."<sup>7</sup> This seems unheard of for this time, an African American woman, in the South, was operating a hospital that treated other African Americans in 1915.<sup>8</sup> Women in general during this time were not operating their own hospitals, so an African American woman operating a hospital is even more surprising. In this sense, Wheeler's determination to provide health care to African Americans in the Chattanooga area demonstrated her perseverance in light racism and oppression.

Wheeler helped many black Americans in Chattanooga gain access to medical care because of the segregation of hospitals during this time. There are accounts of people who desperately needed medical attention like "Mrs. James Porter" a black woman who was "accidentally" shot in the stomach and later taken to Walden Hospital for treatment.<sup>9</sup> However, if Dr. Wheeler did not open Walden hospital people like residents like Porter would not have been treated at all. Wheeler helped "deliver more than 2,000

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<sup>1</sup> Linda T. Wynn, "Emma Rochelle Wheeler (1882-1957), <https://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/wheel.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> The Chattanooga Times, (June 14, 1953), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Valarie Hatch, *Tennessee Through Time: The Later Years*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2008), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Vivian P. Greene, "Walden Hospital," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/walden-hospital/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Chattanooga Times, (June 14, 1953), 3.

<sup>6</sup> SCHWARTZ, JEROME L. "EARLY HISTORY OF PREPAID MEDICAL CARE PLANS." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 39, no. 5 (1965): 450-75. Accessed March 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44449211>.

<sup>7</sup> Linda T. Wynn, "Emma Rochelle Wheeler (1882-1957), <https://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/wheel.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Valarie Hatch, *Tennessee Through Time: The Later Years*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2008), 157.

<sup>9</sup> The Chattanooga news. (Chattanooga, Tenn.), 31 May 1918. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038531/1918-05-31/ed-1/seq-16/>.

babies” at time when prenatal care for women especial marginalized groups like black women was not readily accessible.<sup>10</sup>

Notably, Wheeler also helped train female nurses. Her mentorship prepared a new generation of African American women to use skills to help others and pursue professional careers that would not have been available to them without Wheeler’s training. Chattanooga Times accounts captured this significance. An anonymous person wrote about “the encouragement it,” Walden Hospital, “gives to young Negroes to become doctors.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Walden Hospital acted as a beacon of hope that gave African Americans in Chattanooga to practice their expertise as doctors and nurses. During this period there would have not been much other inspiration for African Americans to continue their education, especially in the medical field.

As a result of her poor health, Wheeler was forced to close Walden Hospital in 1953 but continued to see patients on the first floor of the building.<sup>12</sup> This, yet again, demonstrates Wheeler’s dedication to serving her community. Even though Wheeler was ill herself she still wanted to help others.

In 1957, Wheeler died in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>13</sup> The Chattanooga Times’s obituary referred to Wheeler as someone “who served her race well in the field of medicine and who proved herself a pioneer in the city in the field of human advancement and progress.”<sup>14</sup> Wheeler is still celebrated in Chattanooga since the building that used to be Walden Hospital which is now a housing complex is named after Wheeler. There is currently a historical marker in front of the building.<sup>15</sup>

## Credit

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<sup>10</sup> Valarie Hatch, *Tennessee Through Time: The Later Years*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2008), 157.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chattanooga Times*, (June 14, 1953), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *The Chattanooga Times*, (June 14, 1953), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Linda T. Wynn, “Emma Rochelle Wheeler (1882-1957), <https://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/wheel.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> *The Chattanooga Times*, (September 15, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> Linda T. Wynn, “Emma Rochelle Wheeler (1882-1957), <https://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/wheel.htm>.