

William J. Thompkins

Physician and Hospital Administrator
1884-1944

by David Conrads

The son of a former slave, William J. Thompkins had a multi-faceted career as a physician, hospital administrator, newspaper publisher, and civil servant.

Thompkins was born in Jefferson City, Missouri. He became acquainted with numerous Missouri politicians while he was going to school and working as a bellboy at the old Madison House Hotel. He received a Bachelor of Science degree from Lincoln University in Jefferson City. He later studied at the University of Colorado and at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He served his internship in Washington at the Freedmen Hospital and moved to Kansas City to practice medicine in 1906.

A respected physician, Thompkins was involved in the founding of General Hospital No. 2, which opened in 1908, and by 1924 it was the first hospital in the U.S. to be staffed entirely by African Americans. He was the hospital's superintendent from 1915-1922, the first African American to hold that position. During his tenure the hospital improved from a class D to a class A rating.

Thompkins was appointed an assistant health commissioner in 1927 and conducted an important survey of tuberculosis and housing conditions among blacks in Kansas City. As a result of his survey, hundreds of houses were condemned, and a new hospital serving African Americans was built. The American Public Health Commission adopted the plan of his survey as a model, and President Hoover presented his housing plan to the National Housing Commission in 1930.

In 1928, Thompkins, a staunch Democrat, and Felix Payne, a businessman with connections to the Pendergast machine, started a weekly newspaper serving the black community. *The Kansas City American* became the Democratic rival of the Chester Franklin's Republican *Kansas City Call*. In 1932, Thompkins was named president of the National Colored Democratic Association and helped elect Franklin Roosevelt as president. In appreciation, Roosevelt appointed Thompkins recorder of deeds for the District

of Columbia, a position he held from 1934 until his death ten years later.

Sources

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