November 18, 2016

Rededication of Gen. Gorgas historical marker set for Dec. 1

MOBILE, Alabama — The Mobile County Health Department is continuing its series of special events to mark its 200th anniversary. The next function will take place Thursday, December 1, in Toulminville at the historical marker honoring the birthplace of William Crawford Gorgas.

Gorgas was born in Toulminville on October 3, 1854. He is best known for his work in battling the transmission of yellow fever and malaria by controlling the mosquitoes that carried them. His efforts proved to be vital in the completion of the Panama Canal.

The historical marker is located at 2113 Saint Stephens Road, now the site of Franklin Street Missionary Baptist Church. The ceremony is set for 10 a.m.

In 1983, the Mobile County Health Department moved into the former U.S. Marine Hospital located at 800 Saint Anthony Street. Following renovation of the hospital along with the construction of a new addition to the central structure, all of the services were moved to this new location.

In 1984, the facility was rededicated as the Major General William C. Gorgas Clinic. The main entrance was relocated to 251 N. Bayou Street.

Gorgas was the first of six children of Josiah and Amelia Gayle Gorgas. The community began as a small settlement on the property of Harry Theophilus Toulmin, who served as sheriff of Mobile County in the 1830s. By 1945, all of Toulminville had been annexed into the city of Mobile.

Gorgas eventually studied at The University of the South and Bellevue Hospital Medical College. In June 1880, he was appointed to the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

He was assigned to several posts in Texas. While at Fort Brown in Brownsville from 1882 to 1884, he survived yellow fever. He also met his future wife, Marie Cook Doughty of Cincinnati, whom he married in 1885.

In 1898 after the Spanish-American War, he was appointed Chief Sanitary Officer in Havana. Following on the efforts of fellow Army doctor Major Walter Reed and Cuban physician Carlos Finlay, he worked to prove the mosquito was responsible for the transmission of yellow fever and malaria. He pushed his plans first in Florida, then Cuba and finally at the Panama Canal.

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The PBS documentary titled “Panama Canal” went into great detail about Gorgas’ efforts. In the fall of 1904, Gorgas returned to Washington with a $1 million plan to fumigate the Isthmus of Panama and eradicate yellow fever. But officials scoffed at Gorgas' high price tag and his mosquito hypothesis, instead adhering to the prevailing “miasma theory” that stipulated diseases are carried by bad air or toxins in tropical soil.

The following spring, a yellow fever scare caused a quarter of the U.S. workforce to leave. Alexander Lambert, Theodore Roosevelt’s personal physician, told the president, “You are facing one of the greatest decisions of your career. If you fall back on the old methods you will fail, just as the French failed. If you back Gorgas you will get your canal.”

President Roosevelt granted the funding, and Gorgas unleashed one of the most extensive sanitary campaigns in history. In the summer and fall of 1905, more than 4,000 people worked for Gorgas on his “mosquito brigades” in what would become a yearlong effort to prevent the insects from depositing their eggs. An army of fumigators visited every private home in Panama repeatedly, armed with cleaning agents, insecticide powder and wire mesh for screen windows and doors. Teams sprayed drains and cesspools with oil and filled in pools of standing water.

By November 1906, the last victim of yellow fever on the Panama Canal died. Malaria took longer to conquer, but death rates would drop to less than 1 percent by January 1910.

Gorgas went on to serve as president of the American Medical Association in 1909 to 1910. In 1914, he was made Surgeon General of the Army. That same year, Gorgas and George Washington Goethals — who supervised construction of the Panama Canal — were awarded the inaugural Public Welfare Medal from the National Academy of Sciences.

Gorgas retired from the Army in 1918 at the age of 64. He died in London in July of 1920. He received an honorary knighthood (KCMG) from King George V shortly before his death at the Queen Alexandra Military Hospital. Gorgas was given a special funeral in St. Paul's Cathedral.

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Gorgas’ impact has been recognized throughout the Americas. The following is a list of honors:

- In 1953, he was inducted into the Alabama Hall of Fame.
- The Gorgas Memorial Institute of Tropical and Preventive Medicine, which operated the Gorgas Laboratories in Panama, was founded in 1921. With the loss of Congressional funding in 1990, the institute was closed. It was moved to the University of Alabama in 1992 and carries on the tradition of research, service and training in tropical medicine. The Gorgas Course in Clinical Tropical Medicine is sponsored by the University of Alabama School of Medicine in conjunction with Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Lima, Peru.
- Gorgas Hospital was a U.S. Army hospital in Panama, previously known as Ancon Hospital and named for Gorgas in 1928. Now in Panamanian hands, it is home to the Instituto Oncologico Nacional, Panama's Ministry of Health and its Supreme Court.
- In 1947, the Gorgas Science Foundation was founded at Texas Southmost College (on the site of the former Fort Brown). The foundation supports conservation and ecological science research projects worldwide. The campus also has a Gorgas Hall.
- The Gorgas Medal is awarded by the Association of Military Surgeons of the United States. The award is given to an individual for “distinguished work in preventive medicine, clinical application, education or research.”
- The Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library and his parents’ final home — the Gorgas House — is located on the campus of The University of Alabama.
- William Crawford Gorgas Electric Generating Plant is located along the Black Warrior River near Parrish.
- The German commercial passenger ship-cargo ship SS Prinz Sigismund, after being seized by the United States when it entered World War I on the side of the Allies, had a long American career under the name General W.C. Gorgas from 1917 to 1945.
- Gorgas’ Rice Rat (Oryzomys gorgasi) is a South American rodent named after Gorgas in 1971.
- The Latin University of Panama (Universidad Latina de Panama) named their health sciences faculty in Gorgas’ honor.
- There is a Gorgas Avenue in the Presidio in San Francisco, California.
- His papers are held at the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland.
WILLIAM C. GORGAS

A SERVANT OF MANKIND AND A BENEFACtor TO HUMANITY

BORN IN MOBILE, ALABAMA
OCTOBER 24, 1854
DIED JULY 8, 1920

SURGEON GENERAL
UNITED STATES ARMY
1914-1918

His vision and initiative
led to the Khartoum Scientific
Expedition and the conversion
of the Nile into a means of
transportation and commerce.

He founded the College of
Hygiene and the Bureau of
Diseases of the Panama Canal.

Flag of the United States of America.
GEN. WILLIAM C. GORGAS

On this site stood the Gov. John Gayle home, birthplace of William Crawford Gorgas, world famous sanitarian, Panama Canal Zone, 1902-14; Surgeon Gen. & Maj. General; conqueror of dread plagues of yellow fever and malaria.