

Mary Elizabeth McMillan Thompson (1908-1982)



Mary Elizabeth McMillan Thompson was born on September 29, 1902, in Tarboro, to Alexander and Viola McMillan. She attended Shaw University in Raleigh, and in 1929, she received a B.S. in nursing from Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. a year later, she obtained a public health nursing degree from Howard University. She got her first job with the Cumberland County Health Department, and she continued to work there for thirty-eight years, the remainder of her career.

She was first appointed during a smallpox epidemic, so she gave immunizations, dealt with quarantine requirements, and cared for patients. As her career progressed, she continued to give immunizations and inoculations to the public, made visits to schools, administered treatments for patients with venereal disease, and provided women with birth control. She educated midwives and oversaw maternal health issues in her area. She dealt primarily with the African-American community in Cumberland County, but she also worked with Native Americans.

In her work, she created a rapport with the African American community and acted as an intermediary between white doctors and their black patients. Racism and segregation sometimes formed obstacles in her work, and she also faced antagonism from a local black practitioner of folk medicine. However, it was the rewarding response to her work within the local black community that convinced her to stay in what was originally a short-term assignment for the rest of her career.

For some time, she worked simultaneously at the health department and at Fayetteville State University and then Fayetteville State Normal School, as the college nurse. This arrangement paid for her room and board at the university. Thompson helped to organize the Midwife Institutes held at Fayetteville State University in the 1930s. Nurse McMillan joined the NC

Association of Colored Graduate Nurses in 1933, and by 1945 she was President of District 9 local chapter. A year later she was elected President of the state-wide organization. Her pivotal three- year term ended with the merger with the formerly all- white NC State Nurse Association with the NCANRN. She married in Luther McMillan 1941 and adopted a daughter in 1959. She was named Woman of the Year in Cumberland County, NC in 1956. An article about this event was published in The Carolinian, a Raleigh, NC African American newspaper on 3-10-1956, p 1. She died in 1982 and is buried in the Cross Creek cemetery in Fayetteville.

An oral history interview with Elizabeth McMillan Thompson can be found at:

<https://archive.org/details/ElizabethMcMillanThompson>