

Two doctors of color practiced in Florence in the early years of the 20th century. The first, Dr. Charles Gray, appears to have also died of tuberculosis. All that is known about Dr. Gray is from his obituary published in the *Florence Times* on Friday, July 2, 1908. It said that Dr. Gray was “one of our most worthy colored citizens. Dr. Gray had

Cocke Chas R (Annie), gro 210 s 4th, h 242 Herzberg
 *Coffee Geo W, phys 319½ Broad, h 521 Pipe Shop
 *Coffee Thos W (Florence), paper hagr, h 321 s 3d
 Cohen Harry (Annie), peddler, h 636 Chestnut

(Left) Dr. George W. Coffee Listed in the 1912 Gadsden, Alabama City Directory (Ancestry.com, U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995)
 (Below) 1910 Census Record for Dr. George W. Coffee, Lodging with Robert W. Pope in Gadsden, Alabama (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com) (Bottom) 1920 Census Record for Dr. George W. Coffee in Gadsden, Alabama (National Archives and Records Administration via Ancestry.com)



been thoroughly educated and was a graduate physician. He was one of the most worthy of our young colored citizens and his premature death is much lamented. He died of consumption.” Dr. Gray is not enumerated in the 1900 census for Lauderdale County. He was buried in the Florence City Cemetery, but neither his date or place of birth is recorded. Presumably, he studied medicine in another state and came to Florence sometime after 1900.

The other doctor, Dr. G.W. Coffee (c. 1874-after 1940), was the son of Washington (1837-1918) and Sally Coffee (1848-between 1880-1900), of Lauderdale County. His parents were most likely the slaves of Gen. John Coffee’s son, Capt. Alexander Donelson Coffee. After Emancipation, George and Sally lived on Gunwaleford Road in the vicinity of Capt. Coffee’s plantation, Ardoyne. From 1904 to 1906, he practiced medicine in Denver, Colorado, but not much else is known about his life outside of Alabama. In March 1906, he returned to Florence and opened a practice. The *Florence Herald* published the following statement about Dr. Coffee on March 30, 1906: “He possesses more than ordinary ability, and hopes to make a success of his chosen profession.”

Dr. Coffee is recorded on the 1910 census as a lodger in the house of a Robert W. Pope, a Baptist minister, in Gadsden, Alabama. He is recorded as Dr. G.W. Coffee, a 36-year-old, single, black man working as a public physician. By 1912, Dr. Coffee had set up a practice on Broad Street, and by 1920, he had married a woman named Mamie or Mary and had a newborn daughter. Dr. Coffee was recorded similarly in 1940, indicating that the majority of his life and his years of medical practice were spent in Gadsden.

Perhaps the most well-known African American doctor of Florence is Dr. Leonard Jerry Hicks (1899-1973). Originally from Plant City, Florida, Dr. Hicks was the son of a Baptist minister. Along with his father’s constant encouragement and focus on work over play, as a boy, Dr. Hicks would run errands for a Dr. Callahan, who inspired and encouraged young Leonard. Dr. Callahan even helped Hicks through college, occasionally sending small sums of money. Dr. Hicks first graduated from Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina in the late 1920s. He went on to earn his M.D. from Meharry Medical College in Nashville in 1929. Afterwards, he studied anatomy and surgery at the University of

Pennsylvania. Dr. Hicks came to Florence in 1933 to set up a practice and he served the Florence community for 40 years.

The Great Depression was well underway in 1933 when Dr. Hicks arrived. In a 1968 interview, he recalled that most of the city’s storefronts were boarded up, but that the people were welcoming and kind. Dr. Hicks did well in Florence. In 1953, he became the first African American to be admitted to the Lauderdale County Medical Society. The following year, he became the first African American admitted to the Alabama Medical Association prompting the chief of staff at Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital in southwest Florence to say that Dr. Hicks “has always been a true example of what a doctor should be – an earnest, hardworking man who is devoted to his patients.”

Dr. Hicks continued to serve the city of Florence until his death in 1973. In 1981, the city renamed Sweetwater Street to Dr. Hicks Boulevard, where he also has a historical marker. Beyond the care of a doctor, Dr. Hicks reached the community through his membership and trusteeship of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, as well as the Masonic Lodge No. 583.