

## **Lewis, Henry Wilkins** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1991

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Henry Wilkins Lewis, physician, was born at Spring Bank plantation in Brunswick County, Va., the son of Benjamin and Ellen Wilkins Lewis. After preparing at the Poyner Academy in Lawrenceville, Va., he entered the [University of Virginia](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and began to study medicine. At the time, the ten-month medical course at Charlottesville was the longest in the nation. Lewis then transferred to the University of the City of New York from which he received a medical degree in 1877. After two years of practice in Lawrenceville, he moved to Jackson, [Northampton County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, N.C., sixty miles away. His connection with that area came through his mother, whose family had owned [Roanoke River](#) <sup>[4]</sup> lands since 1803 and had lived at Belmont plantation in the upper part of the county since 1814.

As Lewis himself said fifty years later in an address before the Raleigh Academy of Medicine, he entered his chosen field as a young man of twenty-one at a time of great and momentous change. In the period of his active practice, the discoveries of science were to profoundly alter the course of medicine. The medical training Lewis had received was the equal of any then offered in the nation. Though a lone practitioner in a small community, he kept an inquiring mind and remained abreast of the medical advances that were then occurring in such rapid succession. Lewis was quick to apply this new knowledge to the benefit of his rural practice. His published papers on pneumonia and typhoid fever were well received in state medical circles.

As any form of postgraduate training was unknown at the time, when he had been a decade in Jackson, Lewis went to Baltimore to consult physicians there about problems he was facing in practice. His contact with Baltimore continued after the opening of the [Johns Hopkins University](#) <sup>[5]</sup> Hospital in 1889. In November 1896 Lewis sent for [Dr. William Osler](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, the noted Hopkins physician, as a consultant in the fatal illness of the son of Senator [Matt Ransom](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. On the occasion of this visit to Jackson, Osler referred to Lewis as "the ideal family physician."

In the *North Carolina Medical Journal* of March 1899, Lewis published his most important paper: "Malarial Haemoglobinuria: Its Treatment by Injections of Normal Salt Solution." This condition, a severe complication of [malaria](#) <sup>[8]</sup> known also as "yellow chills" and blackwater fever, was common in areas such as the lower Roanoke Valley where malaria was endemic. The treatment advocated by Lewis, resembling somewhat in effect the intravenous infusions developed later, combated the severe dehydration brought on by the disease. Dr. Osler quickly wrote his approval of the thesis, and this form of treatment attracted great attention at the time. Doubtless, as a result of the work done by Henry Lewis on malaria, Dr. William S. Thayer, Osler's assistant at Johns Hopkins and an authority on the disease, went to Jackson in the fall of 1899. The purpose of this visit was the collection of mosquitoes on the Roanoke to test the vector theory of the transmission of malaria, which was then being worked out by Sir Ronald Ross in England and other scientists.

The years of Lewis's active practice saw the rise of preventive medicine and in this area he made the most lasting contribution. Appointed in 1885 as the first public health officer in Northampton County, a position he held for thirty years, he led the fight against the unsanitary living conditions responsible for the spread of typhoid and malaria. His effective work against smallpox won statewide acclaim. From 1899 to 1907 Lewis served as a member of the State Board of Health, playing a major role in the support of quarantine laws. On his death, the chief of the [U.S. Public Health Service](#) <sup>[9]</sup> paid tribute to his work in the field. Active in the [North Carolina Medical Society](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, he was also an early member and onetime president of the Seaboard Medical Association of North Carolina and Virginia. He died at his home in Jackson and was buried in the churchyard of the Church of the Savior.

In 1884, in Portsmouth, Va., Lewis married Sallie Ann Ridley, widow of Joseph John Long, Jr., of Halifax, N.C., and the daughter of Robert and Ann Eliza Blunt Ridley of Southampton County, Va. They were the parents of three children: Henry Stuart, Ellen Wilkins, and Edmund Wilkins.

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Biographies <sup>[11]</sup>

Physicians, Dentists, Pharmacists, and other Medical Professionals <sup>[12]</sup>

**Authors:**

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**Origin - location:**

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