

Dr. Charles C. Polk

Roselle Physician and Community Leader



Dr. Charles C. Polk was born in Camden County Borough of Barrington, New Jersey on April 12, 1892. He was the eldest of 12 children and the son of a groundskeeper. Dr. Polk attended middle school at night so he could work to help support his family. He was the first eighth grade graduate of the Lawnside Public School. Dr. Polk received his formal high school education in Camden, N.J. He later became one of three African American students in his graduating class at Camden High School. Dr. Polk worked part time while earning both his bachelor's (1917) and medical degrees (1921) from Howard University, a Historically Black College/University.

Dr. Polk started his medical practice with Dr. Howard F. Brock in Westfield, N.J. In 1924, this tall, reserved young physician set-up practice in his home in the Borough of Roselle. He was one of just a handful of black physicians in Union County. Dr. Polk was not able to work at the local hospital because African American/Black doctors had no admitting privileges. He ran his one-room general practice at the corner of Chestnut Street and Seventh Avenue for more than 50 years, into the mid-1970s. His patients needed no appointment because his office hours were five days a week. "Everybody knew if you were going to see Dr. Polk, you'd have to be prepared to sit," said his daughter, Barbara Polk-Riley. "He listened to them. This was part of his practice." He never sent out a bill for his services, although he charged just \$6 a visit. He told his wife and four daughters that his patients would pay when they could.

Dr. Charles C. Polk's patients were of all racial and ethnic background. "He devoted extra care to the local black community making him typical of the many black physicians who, during the

early 20th century, served as community leaders, not merely as doctors”, said Linda Kenney Miller, a historian whose father, John A. Kenney, started the first black hospital in Newark in 1927. “From politics, to churches, to movements for better health and hygiene, to education and community improvements, the black physician was involved,” Kenney wrote in an e-mail. "Providing service and also job opportunities, the black physician was the leader in his community and a professional figure who made his race proud."

Dr. Polk gave free medical exams to student athletes and established a “Well Baby Clinic” on East Ninth Avenue. He was called “The Baby Doctor” due to the hundreds of babies he delivered in their mother’s homes in the Roselle area. He also instituted adult evening classes at a local school to educate his community about health concerns.

Dr. Charles C. Polk helped with college tuition bills for many young people in his community. "He wanted to see as many of his patients as possible finish high school and go through college," said his daughter, Gene-Ann Polk Horne, who became the first African American medical doctor at New York City’s Lenox Hill Hospital in 1955. Dr. Polk financially supported a student who earned the first Ph.D. in chemistry at Howard University and became the president of Marymount College.

In 1992, the school formerly known as Lincoln Elementary School, was renamed and now bears, Dr. Charles C. Polk’s name. Dr. Charles C. Polk Elementary School located at 1100 Warren Street, Roselle, New Jersey is a National Award Winning School. The legacy of Dr. Charles C. Polk continues to be a part of the school’s heart beat with Dr. Polk’s grandson, George E. Riley Jr., who runs an after-school mentoring program at the school.

Dr. Charles C. Polk died in 1990 at the age of 98. His daughters said “he lived a healthy life, taking frequent walks and avoiding butter, pork and mayonnaise. His breakfast every morning was a bowl of corn flakes”.