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An Extraordinary Floridian: A Profile of Spessard Lindsey Holland

Spessard Stone

Spessard Lindsey Holland, father of the 24th amendment to the U. S. Constitution, was a man for all seasons - scholar, athlete, war hero, attorney, and statesman.

Benjamin Franklin Holland, father of Spessard, was born December 15, 1846, Carroll County, Georgia. Benjamin was the son of Lindsey and Elizabeth (Lassetter) Holland. During the Civil War, he served as a recruit from January 1864 to May 1864 in Company I, 2nd Regt., Georgia State Line. His father was orderly sergeant in the same company. Benjamin was then brigaded with regular troops in Cummings Brigade, Stephenson Division, Hood's Corps, and, along with his father, was wounded on June 22, 1864 while making a charge on the federal line at Kulp's Farm. His company was disbanded in March 1865.

A graduate of Bowdoin College, Benjamin moved to Florida in 1882 and settled at Bartow where he founded Polk County's first abstract company. He married Fannie Virginia Spessard, a native of Craig County, Virginia at Monroe County, West Virginia on September 7, 1890. Fannie, who prior to her marriage was a schoolteacher, had first come to Bartow in 1889 to teach at the Summerlin Institute, the first school in Bartow. Spessard's father died January 5, 1925 and his mother died in 1930. The Hollands helped organize the First Methodist Church of Bartow.

They had three children: Spessard Lindsey, Frank L. (1895-1966), and Virginia Holland (1898-1986, Mrs. Roy Trent Gallemore).

Spessard Lindsey Holland was born in Bartow, Florida on July 10, 1892. He attended the Bartow public schools and graduated from Summerlin Institute in 1909 (a complete primary and secondary school which became Bartow High School), where his mother had taught. He received his Bachelor of Philosophy degree magna cum laude at Emory College in Atlanta (now Emory University) in 1912. From 1912-14, he taught high school in Warrenton, Georgia. He then entered the University of Florida in 1914 where, while attending law school, he taught high school in the sub-freshman department (high school) of the university. The first elected president of the student body and a member of the law school debating society, he received his L.L.B. from Florida in 1916 and was admitted to the bar.

He qualified for a Rhodes Scholarship in 1913, but the outbreak of war in Europe kept him from attending England's prestigious Oxford University.

Along with his academic achievements, Holland made time for a variety of college sports and lettered in track, football, basketball, and baseball at Emory and Florida. He made such an impressive showing as a pitcher in an exhibition game against the Philadelphia Athletics in 1916 that Connie Mack offered him a contract, but he declined.

Soon after the United States entered World War I, Holland volunteered in 1917 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Coast Artillery Corps. Lt. Holland was sent to France with the 31st Artillery Brigade, Headquarters Battery, where he served as a brigade judge advocate and assistant adjutant. Transferred at his own
On a mission with Lt. George E. Goldwaith of New York City, his plane was hit and crash-landed in a crater behind American lines. On December 11, 1918, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for valor in action. The citation, signed by Gen. John J. Pershing, Commander-in-Chief, read:

First Lieutenant Spessard L. Holland, C. A. C. Observer 24th, Aero Squadron, distinguished himself by extra-ordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United States at Bois de Banthville, France, on 15 October 1918 and in recognition of his gallant conduct I have awarded him in the name of the President the Distinguished Service Cross.

Transferred back to the United States, he was promoted to captain and toured for the Victory Loan Drive. Capt. Holland resigned his commission in July 1919. While still serving in the army, he married Mary Agnes Groover on February 8, 1919 at Lakeland, Florida. Mary, the daughter of Dr. William Rowan Groover, a Lakeland physician and businessman, and Mary Matilda “Mollie” (Knowles) Groover, was born July 31, 1896, in Fort White, Florida.

Holland had a long and distinguished law career. Admitted to the Florida Bar in 1916, he became a junior partner with R. B. Huffaker in the law firm of Huffaker and Holland in Bartow, but his practice was suspended while he served in World War I. Soon after his discharge from the service and resuming his practice, he was appointed Prosecuting Attorney of Polk County. In 1920 he made his first bid for elective office and won the post of County Judge for a four-year term; he was re-elected in 1924.

In 1929 he again returned to private practice and partnered with William F. Bevis as Holland and Bevis. The firm became Holland, Bevis & Hughes with the addition of Robert L. Hughes Jr. in 1933; Holland, Bevis & McRae, 1946; Holland, Bevis, McRae & Smith, 1953; Holland, Bevis, & Smith, 1961; Holland, Bevis, Smith & Kibler, 1964; and Holland, Bevis, Smith, Kibler & Hall, 1965. Merging in July 1968 with the Tampa law firm founded by Peter O. Knight, the new firm, Holland & Knight LLP, is today one of the largest and most prestigious law firms in Florida, with over 1,000 lawyers in offices throughout the United States and in
several foreign countries.

One of Holland and Knight's most important cases, of which Holland made the closing argument in October 1959, was the Tidelands Case, in which the U. S. Supreme Court confirmed the claim by the State of Texas to 2,440,650 acres of submerged land between low tide and the state's Gulfward boundary - the underwater land extending 3 leagues (10.35 miles) from it coastline into the Gulf of Mexico.4

Holland was elected to the Florida State Senate to represent Polk County in June 1932, and was re-elected in 1936. During every session, he was a member of the school committee, helped draft and co-introduced the Florida School Code, supported measures to improve the schools, raise the pay of teachers and provide for their retirement. He supported workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, citrus law reforms, and repeal of the state poll tax in 1937. He sponsored measures for the reduction of taxes and consistently opposed a state sales tax.5

In 1940, Holland was elected Governor of Florida on the Democratic ticket and served from January 7, 1941 to January 2, 1945. As Florida's World War II-era governor, he promoted the establishment of military bases in the state and mobilized the home front. His administration accomplished many notable acts: in January 1941, the teachers' retirement system was put into effect; the state's public schools were placed on a sounder financial basis; and the state's finances were strengthened by reform of the tax system and refinancing of the state's debt. In this regard the property tax legislation mandated uniform assessments at actual value and tax deeds were validated, thus resulting in increased and prompter tax collections. Recommended by Governor Holland while in office and adopted were four constitutional amendments: pledging gasoline taxes for highway betterment; lowering of the intangible tax; a provision for amending the constitution in a shorter period; and creation of the Florida State Game and Fresh Water Commission.

In 1943, at a conference of governors at Denver, he helped secure revision of railroad freight rates, which aided the South. In 1944 he negotiated deeding of thousands of acres of Florida marsh or submerged land to the United States. From this land, he was instrumental in establishing the Everglades National Park in 1947. During Holland's term, he prevented a lynching of three Negroes at Quincy by ordering them transferred to the Tallahassee jail, to which the

Spessard L. Holland standing with his wife and one of his four children after his inauguration as Florida's governor. (Photograph courtesy of Holland & Knight LLP.)
Spessard L. Holland (left and top left) is pictured above with two of Florida’s most powerful politicians: Governor Fuller Warren (1949-1953) in the center and Senator Claude Pepper. (Photograph courtesy of Holland & Knight LLP.)

mob followed. The would-be lynchers, who had followed them to the jail, backed down after they were confronted by Governor Holland.

Following the death of U.S. Senator Charles O. Andrews on September 18, 1946, Holland was appointed September 25, 1946 as a Democrat by Governor Millard F. Caldwell to fill the vacancy. (Andrews’ term would have expired January 3, 1947.) He was elected to a full, six-year term in 1946 – only the second ex-governor of Florida to be elected to the U.S. Senate and the first Florida native to serve as both Governor and Senator. Holland took office on January 3, 1947, and, subsequently, was reelected in 1952, 1958, and 1964. A conservative Democrat aligned with the Southern bloc, he was a key figure in preserving the filibuster and maintained that civil rights were matters of states’ rights. In opposition to passage of the Civil Rights bill in 1964, he vowed, “We’ll stand up and fight as long as we can.” Major
legislation he supported in Congress included the Marshall Plan, Taft-Hartley labor law, Tidelands Act of 1946, and its successor, the Submerged Lands Act of 1953, the Pan American Highway, and foreign aid. He was one of the original sponsors of statehood for Alaska and the first Southerner to support statehood for Hawaii. Although he never chaired a major committee, he was, nevertheless, considered one of the most powerful senators as he skillfully combined seniority, connections, and friendship to achieve his goals. At retirement, he was serving on three committees: Agriculture and Forestry, Appropriations and Aeronautical and Space Science. The greatest achievement of his legislative career, however, was his sponsorship of the 24th Amendment to the Constitution. The Amendment, which became law in 1964, reads, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.” Poll taxes had long been used to disenfranchise black voters. Having never been defeated for elective office, Holland decided against seeking reelection to the Senate in 1970, and retired in January 1971.  

Throughout his life and career, he was involved in various civic and fraternal organizations and received numerous honors. He served as a member of the board of visitors of the U. S. service academies and as a trustee of Emory University, Florida Southern College, and Florida Presbyterian College. He was a recipient of honorary degrees of LL.D. from Rollins, Florida Southern College, Emory University, Florida State University, and the University of Miami; D.C.L. from the University of Florida, and H.H.D. from the University of Tampa. Named in his honor, among others, was the Spessard L. Holland Law Center at the University of Florida and the Holland Building in Tallahassee. He was a member of the American and Florida Bar Associations, Phi Beta Kappa, Alpha Tau Omega, and Phi Delta Phi. He was also a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Masons (33rd degree Shriners), Kiwanis Club of Bartow, and Elks.  

He was a conservationist and enjoyed bird watching— which his wife introduced him to—and enjoyed hunting and fishing. He was a baseball and football fan and played tennis. His hobby was collecting books on Florida.  

Spessard L. Holland died of a heart attack on November 6, 1971 at his home at 1005
Spessard L. Holland (center) making an introduction to President Harry S. Truman (in hat).

Holland with president Lyndon B. Johnson. (Photographs courtesy of Holland & Knight LLP.)

South Broadway, Bartow. The body, with a uniformed honor guard from MacDill Air Force Base in attendance, lay in state at the First United Methodist Church, of which Holland was a lifelong member. The Rev. Lee R. Van Sickles officiated. Members of the law firm of Holland & Knight served as pallbearers. Interment was in the Holland family plot in Wildwood Cemetery in Bartow. Floyd Christian, then Florida State Education Commissioner, said of him: "No one distinguished himself in public life as much as Senator Holland, both as a governor and a senator. He truly represented the people...He truly was a great public servant."

Mary, Holland's wife of over fifty years, suffered a stroke and died March 22, 1975. She was buried beside her husband in Wildwood Cemetery.

They had four children:

1. Spessard Lindsey Holland, Jr., born May 26, 1921, Lakeland; died March 26, 1989, Melbourne, FL; buried Florida Memorial Gardens, Melbourne; married (1) Elizabeth Jeanette Logan; (2) Dorothy Durrance Bryan; (3) Rita Hinchman McDaniel.


4. Ivanhoe Elizabeth Holland, born June 28, 1930, Bartow; married (1) Augustus Henry King III; (2) Richard Bellaire Craney.  

ENDNOTES

Spessard Stone, a descendant of the pioneer Stone and Hendry families of Florida, was raised in Hardee County and is a resident of Wauchula. Stone is the author of numerous articles in past volumes of The Sunland Tribune as well as John and William Sons of Robert Hendry, The Stone Family, Thonotosassa Pioneers and Lineage of John Carlton.

The author expresses his appreciation to Dr. Canter Brown Jr. for his assistance during the research for this article.

1. “Soldier’s Pension Claim” and Widow’s Pension Claim, Florida Archives; “Information About Spessard Lindsey Holland United States Senator From Florida,” 1; Canter Brown, Jr., In the Midst of All That Makes Life Worth Living: Polk County, Florida, to 1940 (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2001), 135; “Biographical Sketch of the Life of Spessard L. Holland,” Vertical Files, State Library of Florida, Tallahassee, n.d.; “Spessard L. Holland Dies Suddenly at 79,” Polk County Democrat, November 8, 1971; Social Security Death Index. “Information..” has that Fannie Virginia (Spessard) Holland came to Florida in 1888, but Fanny, as she spelled her name, in “Widow’s Pension Claim” averred that she “had continuously resided in the State of Florida since the 1st day of September, 1889.” "Register of Marriage" in the pension application has that Fannie V. Spessard was 29 years old when married; thus she was born ca. 1861. In "Widow’s Pension Claim" of January 20, 1925, her name was printed “Fanny V. Holland,” but the same has, “That she was lawfully married to the said Benjamin Franklin Holland under the name of Fannie V. Spessard in the County of Monroe State of West Virginia on the 9th day of September, 1890...” She, however, signed her name “Fanny V. Holland.” The pension was granted to “Mrs. Fannie V. Holland.” Frank L. Holland was born October 7, 1895 and died in March 1966 at Winter Haven, Florida. Virginia Holland was born May 23, 1898; married in December 1919 Roy Trent Gallemore; died in February 1986, Bartow.


562,212. Regarding the poll tax, Senator Holland, emulating his successful repeal of the tax in Florida as a state senator, introduced the amendment in 1949 and persisted in every succeeding session of Congress until 1962 when it was approved by the 87th Congress; Subsequently, it was ratified by three-fourths of the states and became the 24th Amendment in 1964. Although a Democrat, Holland was “often branded a Republican in philosophy and voting.” See “Sen. Holland Paid A Tribute,” Tallahassee Democrat, September 30, 1966.


