

Thomas, R. K. (2012). Sumner, Francis Cecil. In *Encyclopedia of the history of psychological theories* (Vol. 2, pp. 1049-1050. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag


**Manuscript Version. ©Springer-Verlag holds the Copyright**

**If you wish to quote from this entry you must consult the Springer-Verlag published version for precise location of page and quotation**

## Sumner, Francis Cecil

Roger K. Thomas<sup>1</sup> 

(1) Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, 30602-3013 Athens, GA, USA

 **Roger K. Thomas**  
Email: [rkthomas@uga.edu](mailto:rkthomas@uga.edu)

---

**Without Abstract**

### Basic Biographical Information

Sumner (1895–1954) was born in Pine Bluff, AK, USA. Educational facilities and opportunities were poor for blacks in the South, but Sumner received an acceptable elementary school education in Norfolk, VA, and Plainfield, NJ. However, the high schools were so inferior that Sumner did not attend. Nevertheless, with the assistance of his father, he learned enough to gain entry by examination to Lincoln University in 1911. In 1915, he was graduated with honors in English, Greek, Latin, modern foreign languages, and philosophy. With the encouragement of G. Stanley Hall, the eminent American psychologist and President of Clark College and University (Worcester, MA), Sumner earned a second bachelors degree at Clark in English (1916). Back to Lincoln and while teaching German and psychology, Sumner earned the M.A. degree (1917). Undecided whether to continue his doctoral studies in German or psychology, Sumner was offered full financial support by Hall, and Sumner returned to Clark University to study psychology.

A week after beginning his doctoral studies, Sumner passed the required examinations in German and French. By the end of the academic year, Sumner had completed a manuscript based on his study of the differences between Freud and Adler. Although not intended to be his dissertation, Sumner asked Hall to consider it for his dissertation, Before Hall could act, Sumner was drafted into the US Army for service in The Great War (World War I). Sumner quickly asked and received Hall's support for his admission to officer candidate school. However, it was too late, and Sumner was shipped to Europe as a Sergeant in the 808th Pioneers. Pioneer infantry units, generally, were non-combat units, and Sumner's group was put to work building and repairing railroads. A great irony of American military racial segregation was that Sumner, who

was fluent in the languages of the major combatants (English, German, and French), served on a railroad gang. Nevertheless, the 808th came under heavy artillery bombardment and was among the few non-combat units to be awarded combat decorations (Thomas *1999*).

Sumner returned to Clark in the summer of 1919. His work on Freud and Adler was accepted as his dissertation and was published as *Psychoanalysis of Freud and Adler or Sex-determination and Character Formation* (Sumner *1922*). Sumner was graduated on June 14, 1920, the first black to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. After moving about academically for a few years, Sumner joined the faculty at Howard University in 1928 where he remained until an untimely death by heart attack in 1954. He was buried with honors at the Arlington National Cemetery.

---

## Major Accomplishments/Contributions

Sumner was identified as the “father of black American psychologists” by the eminent black historian of psychology, Robert Guthrie (*2004*). Guthrie used this appellation to acknowledge Sumner’s being the first black Ph.D. in psychology and also for his significant role in the educations of early generations of black psychologists, although Howard University did not confer Ph.D. degrees in psychology during Sumner’s lifetime. Arguably, Sumner’s most important master degree student was Kenneth Clark. Clark earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University. Not only was Clark the only black President of the American Psychological Association to date, he and his wife Mamie, also a Howard student and later a Columbia Ph.D., conducted the famous doll studies which they had begun at Howard. The doll studies influenced the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools and other public facilities as well as any private businesses that depended on interstate commerce.

Sumner’s theoretical contributions include his dissertation (see above) that applied the theoretical tenets of psychoanalysis to explain fundamental differences between two of its major founders, Freud and Adler. Sumner also acquired an interest in the psychology of religion from his mentor, Hall, and he did extensive research on American and European religions. As described by Guthrie, Sumner produced a “massive manuscript” titled *The Structure of Religion: A History of European Psychology of Religion*. Should this manuscript ever be published, it might prove to be a major historical and theoretical contribution. Guthrie also reported that Sumner was the first to establish courses in the psychology of religion at black colleges and universities.

Finally, an important, indirect theoretical contribution by Sumner is that he was an official abstractor for *Psychological Bulletin* and for the *Journal of Social Psychology*. This was before authors were required to include abstracts with manuscript submissions. Guthrie reported that Sumner provided abstracts for more than 3,000 articles from German, French, and Spanish authors.

## See Also

Clark, Kenneth B.

Hall, G. Stanley

Psychology and Religion

---

## References

Guthrie, R. V. (2004). *Even the rat was white* (The Allyn & Bacon classics in psychology series 2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Sumner, F. C. (1922). Psychoanalysis of Freud and Adler or sex-determinism and character formation. *Pedagogical Seminary*, 29, 139–168.

Thomas, R. K. (1999). Francis Cecil Sumner (1895–1954). In J. A. Garraty (Ed.), *American national biography*. New York: Oxford University Press.