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# OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEW ORLEANS YELLOW-FEVER EPIDEMIC, 1878

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Yellow fever was first identified in America, and is sometimes called “a disease of the New World.”<sup>1</sup> The yellow-fever epidemic of 1878 in the Mississippi Valley caused 13,000 deaths and brought economic loss of over a hundred million dollars to the region.<sup>2</sup>

The epidemic in New Orleans in 1878 caused over 4,000 deaths. The disease spread as far north as St. Louis and Louisville during this outbreak. The final yellow-fever epidemic in the United States was in New Orleans in 1905.<sup>3</sup>

The letters which follow were written from New Orleans during the epidemic of 1878 to a Little Rock, Arkansas, physician. The correspondence reveals information concerning the treatment of yellow-fever victims and practice regarding funeral procedures during the epidemic. Comments on the public-health effort by New Orleans officials are also of interest.

The letters were written by E. B. (Edwin Brittin) Jennings who was employed in 1878 as head of the sales department of the New Orleans business of C. H. Lawrence and Company, General Commission Merchants. No other biographical information was located on Jennings except that his birth and death dates were recorded in the family Bible. He was born in Washington, Arkansas, on July 25, 1853, the eldest child of Juliet P. Block and the Honorable Orville Jennings. His death of consumption occurred at Los Angeles, California, January 20, 1888.<sup>4</sup>

The recipient of the letters was Roscoe Green Jennings, M.D., a pioneer Little Rock physician. Dr. Jennings left his native state of Maine

\*Dr. Eugene Nolte, Professor of English, University of Central Arkansas, transcribed these letters before his death and the compiler gratefully acknowledges his work.

<sup>1</sup> George K. Strode, ed., *Yellow Fever* (New York, 1971), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> John Duffy, *The Healers: A History of American Medicine* (1976; reprint ed., Urbana, Ill., 1979), pp. 310–311.

<sup>4</sup> “Family Bible of Orville Jennings,” *Pulaski County Historical Review*, III (1955), 64.

as a young man. He joined his brother, Orville Jennings, the father of E. B., in Washington, Arkansas, sometime after 1857. Dr. Jennings went to Little Rock in 1864 and after the Civil War was engaged in an active medical practice. He was a founder of the Arkansas Industrial University, Medical Department (now the College of Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences). Jennings was active in the local, county, and state medical societies and was president of each.<sup>5</sup> Jennings remained in Little Rock until his death of pneumonia on April 5, 1899.<sup>6</sup>

The year following the 1878 New Orleans epidemic, Dr. Roscoe Jennings reported on the experience with quarantine for yellow fever in the state of Arkansas.<sup>7</sup> Specific mention of travel and mail quarantine is made in several of the letters which follow.

Two brothers of E. B. are mentioned often in the letters. Ernest studied law and was a captain in the Arkansas Quapaw Guard. He died at his Uncle Roscoe Jennings' home at the age of 26 of consumption.<sup>8</sup>

A number of references are made in the letters of E. B.'s desire to bring Chester, the youngest brother, to New Orleans to study medicine. Chester did graduate from medical school from the University of Louisiana (now Tulane University) in 1883 and he also served a residency at Charity Hospital.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Chester Jennings returned to Little Rock to practice where he remained until his death at his home on December 11, 1919.<sup>10</sup>

The letters need no interpretation but reveal to the reader the New Orleans yellow-fever epidemic as experienced by one young man from August 18, 1878, to November 24, 1878.

Augt 18, 1878

Dr. R. G. Jennings  
Little Rock, Ark.

Dear Uncle

Your letter of recent date came only to hand & I note contents— Am glad to say that my health continues good, notwithstanding the great amount of sickness that is prevalent here at present— The fever seems to be on the increase, but there is no way by which the number of cases can be reported as they occur, from the fact that the physicians have so much to attend to that they have not the time to report— The greatest number

<sup>5</sup> *Centennial History of Arkansas* (Chicago, Ill., 1922), II, 153–154.

<sup>6</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* April 6, 1899.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Jennings, "Quarantine and Its Results in the State of Arkansas in 1879," *American Public Health Association. Report 5* (1880), 121–126.

<sup>8</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* April 26, 1882.

<sup>9</sup> *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Pulaski, Jefferson, Lonoke, Faulkner, Grant, Saline, Perry, Garland, and Hot Springs Counties, Arkansas* (1889; reprint ed., Easley, S. C., 1978), pp. 474–475.

<sup>10</sup> "Family Bible," p. 64.

of cases reported in any one day was 134, ending at 12 m on Wednesday last— The days following, 98, 109, & 73 ending at 12 m yesterday (Saturday) making a total for the last four days of 414 cases— It has not as yet been declared epidemic, but in reality I think it is— At the last meeting of the Board of Health, several Physicians who are members of the board, advocated the declaring of it epidemic, but the majority favored not doing so at present—

Walter Black was taken with a severe case at one o'clock this a.m. He sent after Uncle Henry who at once went to see him, gave him a hot mustard foot bath & a purgative, put him to bed & piled the blankets on him & then sent for a Dr. & a nurse— Both came in due time & he is now doing very well— Walter is cool & collected & there is no doubt, I think, but that he will get over it—

Do not mention this to anyone that may communicate the fact of his having yellow fever to his family in Washington [Arkansas]— It would do them no good to know it as they would become alarmed— Walter has been boarding with a family that have a case under treatment for some time, & I think he contracted it there—

This epidemic has seriously interfered with my arrangements & I fear it will be impossible for me to bring Ches here this fall— I anticipated a raise in salary on Sept. 1st which would have enabled me to have brought him here, but business is extremely dull & the prospect is exceedingly blue— It is a bad time to expect an increase under circumstances mentioned above— If you could dispose of my Lawrence Co land, I would most willingly apply the proceeds to paying his expenses— Some arrangements like this must be made in order for him to have the benefit of lectures— I will write him at length as soon as I can find time— Have neglected both he & Ernest of late, but thought a weekly letter to you would answer all purposes— They never write me unless it is in answer to a letter—

I do wish Ernest would get started in practice— It is now time that he was doing something for himself, having had all the advantages he has— I am anxious to see both he & Ches making their own living, that it makes me despondent at times to know that such is not the case— I have been at work now over twelve years & in that time I do not think there is a single person that can say they ever spent a cent for my support— I am proud to know this & would feel much better if Ernest & Chester were in a position to be self-supporting— It is impossible for me to help them, now, but if I were able nothing would give me more pleasure—

Do you receive the papers I send— I forward one every day in order to give you an insight into affairs here— Would be much obliged to you for a L. R. paper occasionally— Well, I have written you a long letter, but whether it will be interesting remains for you to see— It is Sunday morning, & I have taken my time in writing— Give my best love to all— Glad to hear from you often.

Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings

Please regard this as an individual letter & not intended for the public— Since my letter of a short time ago was published, I must ask again

that you withhold my letters from the public, as I dislike to be brought forward before public criticism—

EBJ

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Aug 28, 1878

Dear Uncle

Yrs of the 5th was recd this a.m., & as I am writing to one of our correspondents in St Louis tonight thought I would drop you a line & enclose my letter to him with a request to mail there— If it reaches you all right, let me know by return mail & I will send my letters there to be mailed— If there is an exclusion of St L mail, I can forward either to N Y Chicago Cincinnati or Louisville & have my letters forwarded from either place— I write you a day or two since, but suppose my letter will not reach you, as I see the P.M. here has been ordered to withhold mail matter destined for Arks— Well I am happy to state that my health continues good— Suppose you keep well posted about the fever &c— We are now in pretty bad fix & the fever has become so general that it is impossible to go to any portion of the city without finding it— In some places where its existence is greater, barricades have been built across the streets to prevent wagons & from passing in order not to disturb the sick— Shavings have also been placed on the streets & car tracks in the infected places from banquette to banquette, in order to deaden the sound of passing vehicles— It is a great deal worse than the people are aware of— The Drs are run to death & I hear of some who have been compelled to refuse to attend new cases— The fever is all around where I live & just next door, I am positive there is a case but the family have not proclaimed it such as yet— I am still in good spirits & have made up my mind to give Yellow Jack a tussle if I should be one of the unfortunates— Can't see why people of L.R. should be so alarmed— They had better wait until there is cause— Hope Ernest is passing his time profitably— Why doesn't Ches write me once in a while— Tell him (& Ernest also) that they must consider my letters to you as intended for all— Sincerely hope your wife is out of danger & that her recovery may be speedy— With best love to all I remain in haste—

Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings

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Aug 29, 1878

Dear Uncle

I wrote yesterday & forwarded my letter to St Louis to be mailed— I forward this to Cincinnati— Nothing new since I last wrote— While going home yesterday to dinner, I met in the cars a reporter of the "*Democrat*" & in general conversation stated that I had recd a letter from L.R., stating that the people there panic stricken on account of the near approach of yellow fever— He thought it was good joke & I noticed the following squib in this mornings paper.

A young friend, who has just received a letter from an uncle living in Little Rock, Ark., informs us that the yellow fever scare, or panic, has reached that place, though there is not a case of that disease within 135 miles. Hundreds of people are consequently leaving Little Rock for points further North.

I am still right— No decrease in the fever— It still continues its disastrous work— Let me hear from you often— In haste

Best love to all

Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings

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Sept 4, 1878

My Dear Uncle

Yours of 1st inst is just recd & I note contents— I have written you twice in the last week & forwarded a letter each to St Louis & Cincinnati to be mailed You have doubtless recd them ere this— I will wire you tonight as you desire— Thank God! I still continue well— When I see so many of my friends down with the fever & several having already died it makes me feel sad indeed, but I manage to keep my spirits up, for I must take the consequences— It will never do to give up now— I am facing the music bravely— I have never before seen such times as we are now having— Everybody takes things as coolly as possible under the circumstances, yet it can be plainly seen that our city is in a state of perpetual motion— The first questions asked in the morning is “Are you well & how is the family”— One night works wonderful changes & the person who may be all right when retiring at night in the morning may be one of Yellow Jack’s sufferers— I am now in full charge of the sales department in the store, & the responsibility is no light one— Our bookkeeper & myself now have full charge the house— W.E. Lawrence who has been here all along left yesterday— He will remain five or six days at a station 50 miles on the Jackson RR to see if his system is free of the fever & if he is all right there, will proceed at once to Boston &c— If I can only manage to pass through this fearful epidemic all right I need have no fears as regards my future success in business— They should appreciate what I am now doing for them & believe they will— Why can’t E & C write me occasionally— Have not heard from them for over 2 months— I hope your wife is convalescent— Regret to hear of your accident— Write me often— I send this to St Louis to be mailed—

In haste      Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings

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Sept 7, 1878

Dr R. G. Jennings  
Little Rock Ark

Dear Uncle—

Your of 4th is recd & I am glad to learn that you & your wife are convalescing & I trust that by the time this reaches you, both will be

well— I wrote you the other day fully via St Louis— Also wired you that I was all O.K. — Am still in the same condition Thank God & trust it will be my good luck to stem the current & pass through the epidemic safely— a great many of my friends have died since the beginning of the epidemic, & only yesterday I attended the funeral of a very intimate friend, who died after about five days illness— This p.m., I was informed of the dying condition of another friend & by this time I expect his soul has gone to the God who gave it, & thus we move along— I am very prudent as regards my actions— Keep out of the sun & the night air, the latter being the worst time to be exposed— In reference to disinfectants will state that I am no believer in them— As for carbolic acid my nostrils have feasted on that odor for nearly two months & I can't say I enjoy it either— The streets have been literally sprinkled with it, but for the good it has done, the Board of Health might just as well have spared the pains & expense they went to— Poor Walter Black was a firm believer in Carbolic Acid— He had it in every room in the house, & the trouble was that he thought of the disease so much that he finally worried himself into having it— I read very carefully the article you sent me— Have heard so much about how to treat the disease that I feel as though I could almost treat a case myself— If all the advice contained in the article you sent me was followed by physicians here I am confident the death rate would increase at least three times what it now is & many a poor soul would be called upon to "Climb the Golden Stair"— Yellow fever patients are given little or no nourishment & even when the fever has left, they are given about a teaspoonful of barley water or some such light stimulant every half hour— That is the most critical period— As for allowing a patient coffee, tea toast or baked apple that seems to me highly preposterous & would in itself result disastrously— I do not pretend to know all about the disease, but I have conversed with so many that have recovered this season, that I am confident what I say is correct— A patient cannot get out of bed until after the ninth day & after that he is kept in the house a week or ten days, & it safe to calculate upon losing at least a month from business—

You mention the fact that the disease was brought here by a vessel from Matanzas— In this you are mistaken as the Board of Health have investigated the matter thoroughly & *cannot* find out its origin, but many of the leading Drs firmly believe it originated right here— The streets have been in a wretched condition for many months & the hot sun sending its rays down upon the putrid matter in the streets & gutters doubtless produced the germ that has grown into such immense proportions—

The fever is perfectly terrible— I have heard of whole families dying this season— Nothing but funerals— A friend of mine attended a funeral the other day & he told me that while they were going to the cemetery they met *fourteen* funeral processions— Not much ceremony is observed— If a patient dies in the morning he is buried in the evening & only the family & intimate friends attend— Two & three carriages are all that follow the hearse, & when the shell road is reached the driver put the whip to the horses & away they fly at their greatest speed, & it is all through in a very short time & looks more like a race than anything else—

Well I am getting along first rate— Had my life insured the other day for 2500.00, thinking that if an accident befel me that amt would do somebody some good— If I can only pass through O.K., think my position will be assured & be rewarded by a good salary— None of the Lawrences here now & I am looked to as the head of the sales department. It is no easy matter & my mind is taxed to its utmost capacity sometimes— Nothing from Ernest or Chester for a long time— They might write me once in a while— I send this to St Louis to be mailed— Write often Best love to all—

Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings

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Oct 10, 1878

Dear Uncle

I sent you yesterday a portion of the interview with Dr Jones on the subject of yellow fever & stated that I would send the balance when it appeared— This mornings "*Picayune*" contained the final portion of the interview & I cut it out & enclosed it herein— I think you will find this article<sup>11</sup> very interesting— Dr Jones,<sup>12</sup> as you are doubtless aware, stands at the head of the medical profession & what his views are, can be relied on as accurate— You have doubtless heard of him— Happy to state that I am well— The weather is somewhat cooler, & I sincerely pray it will not be long before we have frost— Death rate continues to range in the neighborhood of 50 per day— Nothing new— Have finished my work down stairs for the day, & I have entered the office the purpose of getting through with my correspondence— about 20 letters to write & it is now six o'clock & I want to get through by 9— So excuse haste— Best love to all— Yours affety

E. B. Jennings

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Nov 24, 1878

Dr. R. G. Jennings  
Little Rock Ark

Dear Sir

I have none of your recent favors to reply to nor hav I anything of importance to communicate— No letters from either Ernest or Chester for some weeks— I trust both are well & are pursuing their avocations with success— I expected to have heard from you about the prospect of your being able to assist Chester to attend lectures this season— If, on receipt of this such is the case, you need have no hesitancy in sending him here, as the Board of Health say it is perfectly safe for strangers to

<sup>11</sup> "Yellow Fever," New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, October 6, 10, 1878.

<sup>12</sup> For biographical information see I. A. Watson, *Physicians and Surgeons of America* (Concord, 1896), pp. 593–597; *Historical Memoirs of Louisiana*, I, 498–503, 1892; and *Journal of the American Medical Association*, XXVI (1896), 441–442.



visit the city—in fact I see scores of western & northern men on the streets every day— In case you send him, telegraph me the day of his departure, & also get him to telegraph from some station in Mississippi so that I will know exactly on what train he will come—

I am getting on about as well as usual— Am kept busy from morning until late at night, & have very little time that I can call my own— My health is excellent & glad to say that I am increasing in weight— The late epidemic had tremendous effect on my nervous system at times, but that now is a thing of the past & it makes me feel sad when I look back & miss the faces of so many dear friends— I just begin to realize what a dreadful thing an epidemic is— Our family are all well— Uncle Henry is still out of business & very much worried & I think his troubles are telling on him physically— Write me often & ask Ernest & Ches to write same— With best love to all I remain

Affety Yr Nephew  
E. B. Jennings