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# The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878

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The United States suffered its last great epidemic of yellow fever in 1878. The disease spread to 132 towns in the States of Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. These five states reported more than 74,000 cases and 15,934 deaths, but Louisiana suffered the most. In the City of New Orleans 4,600 deaths occurred; the mortality for the city was surpassed only in the epidemic of 1853 when 7,970 persons died!<sup>1</sup>

Yellow fever was first recognized definitely in 1647 in the West Indies and was described as "an acute specific disease occurring within certain geographical limits and characterized by a fever of short duration, a yellow tint of the skin, gastro-intestinal disturbances, and haemorrhages into the skin and mucous membranes."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Paul Alliott shortly after 1800 described yellow fever as "an ague accompanied by fever and worms, which are infallible signs of corruption; a burning fire which dries the tongue and coats it; a slow pulse, and a heart continually growing weaker."<sup>3</sup>

The city of Philadelphia suffered severely from an epidemic of yellow fever in 1794 and it was thought that ships plying between Philadelphia and New Orleans transmitted the disease to the latter city. At any rate, New Orleans was stricken in the summer of 1796 with an epidemic that terrified the population.<sup>4</sup> The disease appeared in epidemic form at intervals thereafter, and no one could go from a place where the disease was prevalent to a place free of it without fear that he might take it with him and transmit it to others. Seventy-five miles down the river from New Orleans, the State of Louisiana established a "Quarantine Station," where incoming vessels were halted and detained for an indefinite period, if upon inspection any of the officers

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana*, XXIX, pp. 624-625.

<sup>2</sup> *New International Encyclopedia*, XXIII, p. 795.

<sup>3</sup> H. E. Chambers, *A History of Louisiana*, I, p. 394. Quoted from a letter by Alliott to President Thomas Jefferson, April 14, 1804.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Gayarre, *A History of Louisiana*, III, p. 376.

or crew were found to be ill. Such detention interfered with commerce but one case in New Orleans was sufficient practically to isolate the city until the appearance of cooler weather.<sup>5</sup>

The yellow fever epidemic of 1878 brought death and sadness to the State and nation. The fever was supposed to have reached New Orleans with the ship, *Borussia*, which arrived May 21, and was detained ten days at quarantine. On May 23, the purser of the ship died of what was thought to be yellow fever and on May 30 a member of the ship's crew died, but another member who was ill recovered.<sup>6</sup> Governor Nicholls, upon the recommendation of the Board of Health, had already declared a general quarantine effective May 14, on all vessels arriving from all West India ports, from all ports along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico south of Texas, and from all ports along the Atlantic Coast of South America as far as Buenos Aires.<sup>7</sup>

An epidemic of yellow fever was a calamity that concerned the press sufficiently to command considerable attention. It was reported on July 30 that yellow fever had been raging for several days with one hundred and four cases and thirty-four deaths.<sup>8</sup> The epidemic reached such magnitude that the newspapers on August 19 began giving daily reports on new cases, deaths the preceding twenty-four hours, total cases, and total deaths. These daily reports were given until November 4,<sup>9</sup> at which time, no less than 13,213 cases and 3,954 deaths had been reported in New Orleans;<sup>10</sup> that is to say, approximately thirty per cent of those contracting the fever died. The climax was reached in the early part of September, with three hundred twenty-seven new cases occurring on September 3, and ninety deaths being reported on September 11. During the worst period of the epidemic music was forbidden and church bells were not rung. In one square there were one hundred and three cases and an entire family of seven died and all were buried the same day.<sup>11</sup>

When the fever was declared to be an epidemic there was a general exodus from New Orleans, and this spread the infection to other parts

<sup>5</sup> Chambers, *A History of Louisiana*, I, p. 394.

<sup>6</sup> J. S. Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, I, p. 406.

<sup>7</sup> *Messages and Proclamations of Governor Francis T. Nicholls*, 1878, p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> *New Orleans Picayune*, July 30, 1878.

<sup>9</sup> *New Orleans Times*, August 19 to November 4, 1878, inclusively.

<sup>10</sup> The population of New Orleans was 154,132.

<sup>11</sup> Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, I, p. 406.

of the state.<sup>12</sup> Donaldsonville reported 1,322 cases and 168 deaths;<sup>13</sup> Baton Rouge had 2,463 cases and 159 deaths.<sup>14</sup> The fever spread over the State so extensively that the crops were not harvested in many sections.<sup>15</sup>

The problem of caring for the afflicted and destitute was great, but the entire nation responded generously; gifts came from North, East, and West, as well as from neighboring States. The railroads transported all supplies *gratis* to New Orleans during the epidemic. The magnitude of the relief prompted a meeting of citizens at Turner's Hall on September 8. They discussed these questions:

- (1) By what means can this timely aid be made to benefit all of those and only those who most need it.
- (2) By what means can the distress of thousands who are out of employment be averted after the epidemic has ceased and the distribution of provisions will be stopped.<sup>16</sup>

The Central Relief Committee asked to borrow wagons with which to distribute relief provisions. By October, no less than fifty thousand people were suffering for the lack of the necessities of life. The government lent its aid in the work of relief, and Governor Francis T. Nicholls ordered rations for 40,000 people shipped to New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> The Collector of the Port of New Orleans telegraphed the Secretary of the Treasury, John Sherman, October 6, that a meeting of the chairmen of thirty charitable associations had been held to consider the supplies on hand, the necessities of the people, and more especially the ability of existing organizations to supply what was absolutely needed. A few thought the societies they represented could supply relief for another week. It was their unanimous opinion that the means in the possession of the Howard Association had been greatly over-estimated. Port Collector Smith thought 500,000 rations would not be too much for the 50,000 persons in the city who were in need.<sup>18</sup> At one time the Howard Association had one thousand destitute cases on hand, and it

<sup>12</sup> New Orleans *Times*, October 14, 1878.

<sup>13</sup> New Orleans *Times*, November 1, 1878.

<sup>14</sup> *Weekly Advocate*, November 15, 1878.

<sup>15</sup> New Orleans *Times*, October 20, 1878.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, September 8, 1878.

<sup>17</sup> New Orleans *Times*, September 9, 1878. The Governor's order of September 4, was for 20,000 pounds of ribbed sides, 19,000 pounds shoulders, 20,000 pounds flour, 16,000 pounds corn meal, 21,000 pounds sugar, and 20,000 pounds salt.

<sup>18</sup> New Orleans *Times*, October 7, 1878.

cared for a total of more than 24,000 persons.<sup>19</sup> The St. George Society reported giving relief to 4,946 families and 15,843 persons. Most of this relief was in the form of food, but 619 families or 1,041 persons were furnished with money, doctors, nurses, and medicine. To these should be added the 8,508 fed at the soup house, making a grand total of 24,351 persons relieved and 122,493 rations issued.<sup>20</sup> The damage of the fever to New Orleans was estimated at sums ranging from \$12,000,000 to \$18,000,000.<sup>21</sup>

Medical science had not discovered the cause of yellow fever, and prior to the War between the States the majority of the citizens of New Orleans believed the fever was "a disease of the climate" beyond the control of any preventive measures.<sup>22</sup> The Territorial Governor, W. C. Claiborne, in a message to the Legislative Council on December 14, 1804, had called the attention of that body to a plan by President Jefferson to prevent yellow fever. As it was observed the disease flourished in crowded areas, it was proposed to spread the future New Orleans out over a wide area.<sup>23</sup>

It appeared that yellow fever had the peculiarity of attacking newcomers in preference to natives and it seemed to select the Flemish, the English, and the Americans. It was unusual for the Americans to recover; they generally died the second or third day after taking the fever.

There was a woeful lack of regard for the ordinary laws of sanitation, and it appears that certain officials were negligent. One newspaper announced:

It comes to our knowledge, upon authority abundantly reliable, that 4,000 loads of kitchen garbage which had been hauled to the dumping grounds by the city carts have been brought back by the contractors and used to fill up streets in the front part of the city.<sup>24</sup>

In 1878 it was still believed that yellow fever was caused by filth

<sup>19</sup> Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, I, p. 406.

<sup>20</sup> *New Orleans Times*, November 2, 1878. The St. George Society reported that of the 15,843 persons relieved, 13,000 were Irish, 1,840 English, 238 Scotch, 300 from Jamaica, 144 Canadians, 191 from Hong-Kong, and 30 Americans. Of the 8,508 fed at the soup house, 55 per cent were Irish, 25 per cent English, 5 per cent Canadian, 5 per cent other nations, and 10 per cent Americans.

<sup>21</sup> *New Orleans Times*, January 17, 1879.

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana*, XXIX, p. 625.

<sup>23</sup> Gayarre, *History of Louisiana*, IV, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> *New Orleans Times*, September 18, 1878.

and by failure to apply the ordinary principles of sanitation. Dr. J. Holt reported August 8, as follows:

Neglect unutterable has characterized the whole system of street cleaning. The carelessness and neglect in the removal of garbage, the dumping of garbage by hundreds of cart loads into populous streets, the most horrible outrage ever perpetrated upon a civilized community, the bad state of some of the markets, especially the Magazine market, and above all the pernicious method of pretending to clean the streets and gutters by gangs of men employed in throwing their contents into the streets, under a blazing sun to putrefy and presently to be washed back again by a passing shower; all of these causes have been combined to prepare the community for the inevitable and legitimate result of such flagrant disobedience of all sanitary laws, the appearance and rapid spread of some malignant contagion.<sup>25</sup>

The Sanitary Commission reported that yellow fever was indigenous under favorable conditions. It proceeded from a combination of filth, heat, and moisture, and if these conditions did not exist, it was not contagious. It declared every epidemic of yellow fever had been proved by investigation to have originated in such conditions.

The yellow fever epidemic was so alarming that the President of the United States appointed the United States Yellow Fever Commission to investigate the causes and prevention of yellow fever.<sup>26</sup> The investigation began the first of the year 1879 in New Orleans and much testimony was taken, but time has proved its conclusions unsound and unscientific. As the press said, it threw "no light on this subject of vital interest to the people of the South."<sup>27</sup>

As the epidemic of yellow fever showed signs of subsiding, Governor Nicholls proclaimed October 9 as a day of prayer and thanksgiving. He called on the people to recognize their dependency upon God and to exhibit their faith in His power and mercy. Every person was requested:

to repair to some place of public worship and there humbly invoke our Heavenly Father to stay His chastening hand and deliver us from the scourge which, baffling human skill and all that devotion, courage, and

<sup>25</sup> *New Orleans Times*, September 20, 1878.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, October 7, 1878. The commission consisted of Dr. S. M. Bemiss (New Orleans), Dr. Jerome Cochran (Mobile), and Professor E. Lloyd Howard (Baltimore).

<sup>27</sup> *St. Landry Democrat*, January 18, 1879; *New Orleans Times*, January 4, 5, 7, 8, and February 7, 1879.

charity can bring to its assistance, still spreads desolation throughout our own and sister states.<sup>28</sup>

The people were to invoke God's blessings also upon those who had so generously manifested their devotion, courage, and humanity in the dark hours of the supreme distress. The Thanksgiving proclamation of Governor Nicholls contained the following reminder:

The summer which has passed has left many of our households in Louisiana desolate, but even through the sadness of the year there is no one among us but who has cause to recognize God's kindness and mercy. In humble recognition of that, I do recommend to the people of Louisiana that on the day suggested they unite with the people of the entire country in a common expression of gratitude to their maker.<sup>29</sup>

Governor Nicholls in his message to the legislature, January, 1879, spoke of the destructive epidemic of yellow fever, the spontaneous exhibition of sympathy, Christian charity, and brotherhood of a common country. Lieutenant Governor Wiltz, also referred to the yellow fever epidemic, the philanthropic contributions from all classes of people in all sections of the nation and from cities abroad. He suggested that suitable resolutions should be passed to let the world know that the people of Louisiana were not ungrateful.<sup>30</sup> The legislature passed an appropriate joint resolution of thanks for the contributions which reached \$1,100,000.<sup>31</sup>

The people of New Orleans feared a return of the yellow fever in 1879 and Governor Nicholls<sup>32</sup> took the precaution to declare a quarantine of twenty days beginning April 30. The commercial interest objected vigorously to the quarantine<sup>33</sup> order and the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Association joined in the protest.

It was not until the turn of the century that the real cause of yellow fever was learned, and it is quite generally known today that the fever is an acute infectious disease which is transmitted from the sick to

<sup>28</sup> *Messages and Proclamations of Governor Francis T. Nicholls*, 1878, p. 418. Proclamation was issued October 1, 1878; *Daily Picayune*, October 9, 1878; *New Orleans Times*, October 5 and 9, 1878. The mayor of New Orleans issued a proclamation also naming October 9, as a day of prayer.

<sup>29</sup> *Messages and Proclamations of Governor Francis T. Nicholls*, 1878. The proclamation was issued November 31, 1878.

<sup>30</sup> *Journal of the Senate of Louisiana, Regular Session*, 1879, p. 3 and pp. 7-20; *Picayune*, January 7, 1879; *New Orleans Times*, January 6, 1879.

<sup>31</sup> *Journal of the Senate of Louisiana, Regular Session*, 1879, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Message and Proclamation of Governor Francis T. Nicholls*, 1879. The proclamation was issued April 17, 1879.

<sup>33</sup> *New Orleans Times*, April 18, 1879.

susceptible individuals through the agency of mosquitoes. The yellow fever mosquito (*Stegomyia fasciata*) is found in tropical and semi-tropical regions, and especially in lowlands near water. This mosquito serves as "an intermediate host" for the yellow fever parasite, which is present in the blood of those sick with the disease during the first three days of the attack. A period of twelve days is required for the yellow-fever parasite to develop in the body of the mosquito before it can be transmitted to another individual through stinging or biting.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>84</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana*, XXIX, p. 624.