THE POIGNANT PUBLIC AND THE PARAMOUNT PRIVATE: THE FAILURE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE RESCUE OF CHARITABLE ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE 1878 YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

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Abstract

Yellow fever, caused by the Aedes Aegypti mosquito, ravaged the southern United States many times during the 19th century, especially in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis in the 19th century was marked by a lot of promise before and after the Civil War but continued to be set back by unresolved issues. These unresolved issues included government corruption, the neglect of financial matters, and unattended sanitary concerns, which ultimately caused pestilence to be prevalent in the city. In 1878, Yellow fever struck Memphis, causing the municipal government to collapse and resulting in many people leaving the city behind. For those who couldn't leave, Yellow fever would cause plenty of despair and death. However, not all was lost with the creation of charitable organizations. These included the Howard Association, who focused on medical care, and the Citizen's Relief Committee, who worked as the de facto government. Both organizations worked separately but cooperatively to provide medical care and restore order to the city, ultimately saving many lives and revealing the neglect and need for health reform in Memphis. Much of the research into these organizations comes from Memphis journalist J. M. Keating's A History of the Yellow Fever: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, in Memphis, Tennessee. With the help of Keating's book, newspaper articles written in Memphis during the pandemic, and other journal articles analyzing the pandemic in its entirety, we can begin to understand how these charitable and private organizations were more effective in handling this crisis and how it changed the course of health reform in Memphis.

Background

On September 11th, 1878, the Memphis newspaper Avalanche produced a chilling report: "A stricken city! Alas, fair Memphis! What sights meet the eye of those who yet remain in your midst!"[1] Almost a month before, on August 23rd, yellow fever had been officially declared an epidemic by the Board of Health in the city of Memphis. The underfunded Board of Health would only continue to meet until the end of the month with it, and most other government institutions, collapsing.[2] There were even reports of entire families perishing in neighborhoods around the city.[3] However, not all hope was lost in Memphis. For the 20,000 people who remained in yellow fever's midst, awful sights awaited, but many charitable volunteer organizations made up of prominent community members came to the aid of the poor, who could not afford to leave the city. These private groups: the Howard Association and the Citizens' Relief Committee, were more equipped than state agencies to handle the 1878 yellow fever epidemic because of their focus on organization systems, charitable goals, and understanding of the importance of public health.

Yellow fever originated in the tropics of Africa and South America, and causes fever, chills, muscle aches, vomiting, and yellowing skin and eyes. The disease spreads through infected Aedes Aegypti mosquitoes. The Atlantic Slave Trade brought the mosquitoes and already infected people to the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[4] Urban areas were hit especially hard by yellow fever due to dense population sectors and sustainable environments for the Aedes mosquito to breed.[5]

Memphis, an urban area, offered much promise in the 19th century, before and after the Civil War. Its location on the Mississippi River connected it with the rest of the nation. Being situated in the middle of the country also allowed Memphis to be a gateway to the West, with newly built railroads from New Orleans and Charleston. Additionally, the city's main produce, cotton, would in total bring Memphis' city receipts to be around $40,000,000 by the time of the Civil War.[6] During this time, the population of the city almost doubled, from 22,623 in 1860 to 40,266 in 1870, with many being

1 John M. Keating, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis, Tennessee," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 42, no. 3 (1968): 59.

2 Thomas H. Baker, "YELLOWJACK: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis, Tennessee," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 42, no. 3 (1968): 250.

3 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 161.

4 Elena Gianchecchi et al., "Yellow Fever: Origin, Epidemiology, Preventive Strategies and Future Prospects," *Vaccines* 10, no. 3 (2022): 372.

5 *Ibid.*

6 John H. Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 15.

Irish immigrants and newly freed African Americans.[7] The city seemed to be on track for more economic growth and progress but often was held back by mismanagement and pestilence.

The mismanagement stemmed from a power struggle in the years after the Civil War. In 1866, a year after the Civil War ended, riots began between Irish policemen and African American soldiers, resulting in the deaths of about 48 people.[8] Leading up to the riots, there was a power struggle between the Irish minority, who had taken power of the local government during the Civil War, Union African American soldiers stationed in Memphis, and the newly founded Freedmen's Bureau, created to protect newly freed African Americans.[9] After the ensuing violence, the state government passed the Metropolitan Police Bill, which took power away from the local government and resulted in the state taking over the police force.[10]

Even before the 1878 epidemic, Memphis had a reputation for being a disease-ridden city. Memphis' location on the Mississippi River contributed to the city's swampy environment, which made it a breeding ground for disease, insects, and parasites. Numerous smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever epidemics had already come through the city's history. The worst of these came in 1855, 1867, and especially in 1873, when all three diseases wrecked the city, killing almost 2,000 people.[11] An editor for the Avalanche wanted Memphians to consider that the prevalence of three epidemics in 1873 alone gave an "unfavorable impression" that the city could "dwindle into nothingness."[12]

Causes of Yellow Fever in Memphis

Through all these epidemics, unchanging sanitary laws had kept the streets of Memphis filthy. This would especially become a concern during the hotter months of the year: August and September. During these months, the issue of "decaying vegetable matter, unremoved garbage, stagnant pools, marshes, [and] filthy streets and alleys" would stick out to the population.[13] There was not an organized garbage collection system to clean up these

7 John H. Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City: The 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, no. 28 (1974): 75.

8 Art Carden and Christopher J. Coyne, "An Unrighteous Piece of Business: A New Institutional Analysis of the Memphis Riot of 1866," *George Mason University* (2010): 14.

9 *Ibid.*

10 R. L. M'Donnold, "The Reconstruction Era in Tennessee," *The American Historical Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1896): 318-319.

11 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 78.

12 "Daily Avalanche," *The Daily Memphis Avalanche*, Oct 13, 1873, 2.

13 "Keep the City Clean," *Public Ledger*, August 16, 1877, 3.

nuisances, even with countless calls for it from the press.[14]

The water in Memphis was no better. Most of the people in the city got their water from wells and cisterns, which were dangerously close to contaminating privies.[15] The waterworks in Memphis were also privately owned by the Memphis Water Company, and by 1877, this company was on the verge of bankruptcy and pumping most of its water from the contaminated Wolf River.[16] This river, which also fed into the Mississippi, was connected to the worst water in the city, the Bayou Gayoso. This bayou, which ran throughout the entire city, was backed up with sluggish waste from sewers, sinks, and vaults.[17] Even during the summer months, the bayou would not flow and many grew to believe that the filth caused yellow fever through miasma, or as disease which spreads in the air.[18] The wells, cisterns, and the bayou undoubtedly assisted in the Aedes Aegypti mosquito appearing, the insect that we now know is the real cause of yellow fever.[19]

When yellow fever struck in 1873, the problem of overcrowding was exposed in the poor Irish neighborhood of Happy Hollow in two ways:[20] The first was the arrival of the Bee steamboat, which brought a family from disease-rattled Shreveport, Louisiana, to the settlement. The second was the emptying of an old cistern, which had not been used since the Civil War, into a nearby pond.[21] Both of these culminated in yellow fever invading this poor, foreign-born Irish neighborhood where it "began knocking the doors on Promenade Street."[22] Some people in this neighborhood lived in homes of "dilapidated materials," such as rotting wood.[23] Sometimes these small spaces held 15-20 people in one living space.

The neglect of sanitary implementation from the municipal government may have been expected considering financial implications. The end of the Civil War in 1865 left the city with a severe lack of funds , especially with

14 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 103.

15 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 76.

16 Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health*, 29.

17 Peter Murtough, *Condensed History of the Great Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878* (Memphis: S. C. Toof & Co., Printers and Lithographers, 1879), 60.

18 *Ibid*.

19 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 76.

20 *Ibid*.

21 Anne Marie McMahon Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association: A Study in the Growth of Social Awareness" (M.A. diss., Memphis State University, 1968), 58.

22 Daily Avalanche, October 25, 1873, 2.

23 Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health*, 22.

the end of slavery.[24] Without proper tax-collecting methods, financing the city government was challenging and drained city funds. The municipal government also continued to default on interest payments, and from the end of the war until 1872, it very rarely redeemed interest coupons until they fully matured.[25] By 1878, the situation in Memphis had not improved. In total, the city of Memphis accumulated a debt of about $4,500,000. The city was failing and was on the way to losing its charter.[26]

The Beginnings of the 1878 Epidemic

The perfect storm was brewing in Memphis for the 1878 yellow fever epidemic. About five months before the epidemic swept through, Memphis newspapers questioned the City, as it crippled the Board of Health and abolished the sanitary police. This was concerning especially to the people, considering there was a loss of almost $30,000,000 in trade revenue during the last epidemic in 1873.[27] By early June, when the fever started spreading through Havana, Cuba, the Board president, Dr. R. W. Mitchell, requested $10,000 for strict quarantine measures, but Memphis council members refused the proposal. This was ultimately decided because of the fear of disrupting trade in the already crippled economy and the division of medical opinion between Dr. Mitchell and former Board president, Dr. John Erskine.[28] As a result, Dr. R. W. Mitchell decided to resign in protest, saying yellow fever in Memphis would be "our own fault in not taking the known necessary precautions against it."[29]

The Board of Health eventually decided on preventative measures. When yellow fever started running up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, Louisiana, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, in late July, the results of the inefficient actions of the government and the Board of Health came to light. The Board, that "only a few days ago . . . gave evidence it was a live organization,"[30] presented its first actions from the new president of the Board, Dr. D. D. Saunders. Dr. Erskine, who previously was against quarantine measures, requested for a quarantine of ships from New Orleans on President's Island and the addition of 100 men for sanitary forces.[31] The city's treasury was out of money with no help from the government, so they looked elsewhere for financial help, particularly from the Howard

24 Lynette Boney Wrenn, "The Impact of Yellow Fever on Memphis: A Reappraisal," *The West Tennessee Historical Society* Paper 41 (1987): 7.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 77; Keating, "Yellow Fever," 101.

27 "Ledger Lines," *Public Ledger*, Mar 15, 1878, 3.

28 "The Yellow Fever Scare," *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 27, 1878, 1.

29 Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 243; Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 79–80.

30 "The Yellow Fever Scare."

31 "Strict Quarantine," *Public Ledger*, July 30, 1878, 3.

Association of Memphis.[32]

The Howard Association

The Howard Association was originally organized in New Orleans, Louisiana, as a direct result of the yellow fever epidemic of 1837. In that year of the epidemic, New Orleans was undergoing a financial crisis, heated political turmoil, and a dysfunctional board of health.[33] In response, The Howard Association, named after the famous philanthropist John Howard of the United Kingdom, was founded by a group of wealthy young men who offered supplies, medical care, and assisted in burying the dead.[34] By the 1850s, the Howards of New Orleans had grown their organization to receive fundraising from all around the county, especially in the Eastern United States, which allowed them to expand their charitable actions to social work and open functioning hospitals.[35]

By the late 1850s and 60s, Memphis, Tennessee, was in a similar situation to New Orleans in the 1830s. As mentioned before, due to mounting financial issues and a complete absence of sanitary laws, yellow fever appeared in Memphis in 1855. In response, the Howard Association of Memphis, a prototype organization almost identical to the one in New Orleans, was organized on October 1st, 1855.[36] They stayed around for only as long as epidemics persisted, so they remained dormant until they reorganized on September 29th, 1867 under the same circumstances.[37] After their charitable works in 1867, they were officially given a charter by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee with the goal "to provide nurses and necessaries for those who may be taken sick, who without means and funds, and particularly during the prevalence of epidemics."[38] Once again, when pestilence struck around September 14th, 1873, they reorganized with the purpose of distributing charities and the employment of nurses.[39]

In 1878, the relationship between the Board and the Howards was weak. In a city board meeting, when Dr. D.D. Saunders mentioned Memphis would need $10,000 for preventative measures, Dr. Paul Otey of the Board of

32 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 103.

33 Peggy Bassett Hildreth, "Early Red Cross: The Howard Association of New Orleans, 1837-1878," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20, no. 1 (1979), 52.

34 Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health*, 32.

35 Hildreth, "Early Red Cross," 60–61.

36 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 29.

37 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 135.

38 *Ibid.*

39 "Notice. The Howard Association," *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 17, 1873, 1.

Health replied that the Howard Association had $40,000 in their treasury.[40] However, the Howard Association refused to give sanitary funds to the city, citing that its charter constitution only allowed its funds to be used for charitable purposes.[41] The Public Ledger wrote to Memphians, stating that the government "ought to pay their city taxes" before taking money used for the poor.[42] Eventually, the Howards did give $4,000 for the purpose of prevention; however, incidents, as when the Golden Crown steamboat provided a fake admission slip to enter the city with five New Orleans residents, proved these measures to be ineffectual.[43]

Panic Begins

Many cases of yellow fever went unreported. The Board of Health was concerned with rumors that yellow fever had arrived in Memphis, and those were promptly investigated. Many reports concluded that these cases were malarial fever, with any other claim being "in many instances malicious."[44] The rumors began circulating more in Memphis, when on August 10th in Grenada, Mississippi, there was a call for help related to yellow fever, which Howards Butler P. Anderson and W. J. Smith answered.[45] After this, the Board of Health and the press assured people that if yellow fever entered Memphis, it would be reported.[46] However, the same publication issue reported on a doctor who declared a yellow fever case. The doctor backed up his claim with evidence of black vomit, a unique indicator of yellow fever. [47] Instead, Drs. Saunders and Erskine declared it to be malarial fever.[48] There were a total of 14 deaths of what they though was malarial fever from July 28th to August 7th, all of which were later declared to be deaths from yellow fever.[49]

With the failure of quarantine measures and rumors of fever quickly spreading, panic erupted in the city. Almost 25,000 people immediately fled to nearby cities, leaving 20,000 remaining to face the epidemic, with 14,000 of those being impoverished African Americans and the rest mostly foreign

40 "Sanitary Measures," *Public Ledger,* July 31, 1878, 3.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

43 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 119–120.

44 "There is No Yellow Fever" *Public Ledger,* August 7, 1878, 3.

45 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 103.

46 "The Health of Memphis," *Daily Appeal*, August 13, 1878, 4.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 126.

whites.[50] On August 13th, when local shopkeeper, Mrs. Kate Bonida, died of yellow fever, the Board of Health officially declared this the first death of an epidemic, announced 10 days after her death.[51] The Howard Association of Memphis, though still active beforehand, officially reorganized on the day of Mrs. Bonida's death, to come to the aid of those who did not flee.[52] Dr. Mitchell, the former chair of the Board of Health, was called to run the medical corps wing for the Howards.[53] Their plan of action was to send Howard members to one of the 10 wards they created in the city to get a count on how many were sick and what supplies they needed. Then, they would collect supplies and employ doctors and nurses to provide care for the individuals and families that needed the support.[54] In total, the Howards would employ about 111 doctors, each making about $60 a week.[55]

The Citizens' Relief Committee

While the Howards focused on medical care, another charitable organization, the Citizens' Relief Committee, was created with the goal of organizing relief efforts. This committee, led by Gage & Fisher Cotton Factors partner, Charles G. Fisher, was assembled around the 19th of August after an announcement in local newspapers of a Citizens' Relief Committee meeting.[56] It was filled with many influential members of the community, including the editor of the Memphis Appeal, J. M. Keating, who wrote The Yellow Fever Pandemic of 1878, in Memphis Tenn. in 1879, which was one of the most compressive reports of the epidemic. Keating is also probably a major reason why these organizations got so much press coverage.

J.M. Keating fled to the United States from Ireland in 1848 after the Young Ireland Rebellion and settled in Memphis in 1858.[57] He started as an editor of the Memphis Bulletin and then after the Civil War ended, he founded the Memphis Daily Commercial. Not long after, he became a co-owner and editor of the Memphis Appeal, the position he held during the 1878 epidemic in Memphis. Instead of fleeing like other prominent Memphians, Keating, as mentioned before, remained active in relief efforts and continued to cover the epidemic. Keating's writings are credible in

50 Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 245–246

51 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 146.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic that Shaped our History* (Penguin Group, 2006), 56.

55 Randal L. Hall, "Southern Conservatism at Work: Women, Nurses, and the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1997): 248.

56 "Citizens' Relief Committee," *Public Ledger*, August 19, 1878, 1.

57 Steve Pike, "Memphis Moment: J. M. Keating," *WKNO* 91.1., July, 24, 2008, https://www.wknofm.org/news-and-features/2008-07-24/memphis-moment-j-m-keating.

that they are primarily factual or based on other accounts of the epidemic. Also, Keating's report of the epidemic was published through the Howard Association with the intention of raising money for a statue in Memphis commemorating the doctors and nurses.[58] There is no reason to believe that Keating's intentions were anything other than to provide information and use his position to help the people of Memphis.

The Citizens' Relief Committee managed and distributed supplies to the city. Pairs of Committee members were assigned into 10 wards in the city to provide aid, similar to the Howards. Each pair was given an African American representative.[59] Between the months of August and October, the Committee would provide 745,735 rations including but not limited to: around 290,000 pounds of bacon, 68,000 pounds of hay, and 58,000 pounds of sugar.[60]

The immediate goal of the Citizens' Relief Committee was to set up refugee camps outside of Memphis. The goal of these camps, like Camp Williams (named after a doctor who died during the yellow fever epidemic of 1873), was to remove from the city people who were not sick and people who could not afford to go elsewhere.[61] The press urged all people to go, with the promise of furnishing and supplies with a train leaving daily to take residents to Camp Williams.[62] These supplies were provided by the federal government and included rations and tents, with even President Rutherford B. Hayes reassuring citizens that "the secretary of war will do all in his power."[63] Although this camp would care for over 1,000 people, many in the city decided to remain at home, most being poor African Americans and Irish immigrants.[64]

Back in the city, the Citizens' Relief Committee acted essentially as the municipal government in Memphis. In early September, government institutions and the Board of Health began to cease to function, with many members fleeing to camps or beyond.[65] Even before this occurred, the Committee had already been coordinating supplies to be distributed at commissaries.[66] People could submit applications for aid at one of the 10 wards established in the city. In these wards, the Citizens' Relief Committee gave aid when necessary and cared for the welfare of the ward they were

58 Keating, "Yellow Fever," i.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 251.

62 "Special Notice," *Public Ledger,* August 20, 1878, 2.

63 "The Citizens' Relief," *Daily Appeal*, August 22, 1878, 2.

64 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 82.

65 *Ibid*. 83

66 "The Fever at Home," *Daily Appeal*, August 29, 1878, 2.

located in.[67] For that purpose, the Committee was given control of the police force and fire department.[68] Perhaps the most important act of the Committee in this regard is the unheard-of integration of African Americans into the police force. When most of the force had been stricken ill or simply left, Police Chief Philip Athey, who stayed behind, "point[ed] at a crowd of negros across the street," and under the Committee's discretion, hired 13 African American policemen.[69] The work of the Committee "with such auxiliary, under the protection of such strength" allowed the Howards to do their medical work without interference of trouble and chaos.[70]

Care Organization

Medical work in Memphis continued to be grueling, with many volunteer Howard nurses being expected to care for the thousands of sick and dying. These nurses, a total of 2,995 overall, were paid about $4.00 a day, including room and board.[71] However, no price could afford the horrifying sights. One report described a residence that housed a dying, breastfeeding mother, with the father and all but one child deceased out of four.[72] The quality of the nurses was in question as well, considering two front-page advertisements from the Howard Association in the Daily Appeal. The first advertisement requested people to report neglectful nurses, considering that their "reputation depends upon their faithful performance," and the second advertisement displayed a significant need for female nurses.[73] By September 9th, there was death "from every mansion, cot, and hovel," with an estimated 4,500 total deceased.[74] Even with that fact, volunteer nurses were flocking from around the country from as far as Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, to name a few.[75]

Continuing their relief efforts, the Howards and Citizens' Relief Committee coordinated the opening of infirmaries, drug stores, and other needs throughout the community. The Howards opened two hospitals, one for whites at the Market Street School and another for African Americans

67 "Where to Go for Help," *Public Ledger*, September 9, 1878, 1.

68 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 130.

69 Dennis C. Rousey, "Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly," *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (1985): 366, from the journal article Public Ledger, August 18, 1878.

70 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 133.

71 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 149–150.

72 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 155.

73 "To the Citizens of Memphis," *Daily Appeal,* August 27, 1878, 1.

74 "The Situation," *Public Ledger*, September 9, 1878.

75 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 150.

on Lipton Street. Both hospitals cared for hundreds of people.[76] The Howards and the Committee opened supply depots for medical stocks, also located in transformed schoolhouses. Here, designated doctors gave care and handed out required supplies, which were ready to be retrieved if orders were placed.[77] The Committee also took the pleasure of opening an orphan home for children of deceased or sick parents with the support of local Episcopal nuns.[78] The results of all their efforts were coming to fruition, as by September 19th, there was the first evidence of a decrease in both deaths and cases.[79]

As cases slowly dwindled, the Howards' and Committee's network of trains and telegraph stations made the ability to send aid elsewhere simple and rapid. By September 26th, the Howard Association received telegrams from towns from 30 to 60 miles away, including Collierville, Germantown, and Brownsville.[80] The work of the telegraph office cannot be overstated because it provided relief to even more far-away towns and a connection for outsiders to donate. The telegraph office workers were "exposed . . . more than any other class, save the doctors and nurses, to the fever poison."[81] By the end of the epidemic, only one telegraph worker remained.[82] The Southern Express superintendent, Major W. A. Willis, also a member of the Citizens' Relief Committee, committed to sending people and supplies to and from wherever they needed to go for little to no expense.[83] These trains would provide relief to towns along the Louisville railroad, with the intention to expand along the Charleston and Tennessee railroads.[84]

The Howards and the Citizens' Relief Committee led initiatives for burials and even scientific research. With the thousands dying in Memphis creating an awful stench of death spreading throughout the city, the Committee was given the responsibility of printing death certificates. The allocation of burials was decided after a meeting with Mayor Flippin and the chair of the Board, Dr. D.D. Saunders.[85] This was designed to help the county undertaker, Jack Welsh, who was burying, on average, 68 bodies per week

76 "The Fever at Home," *Daily Appeal*, August 28, 1878, 2; Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 255.

77 "The Howard Association," *Public Ledger*, September 30, 1878, 2.

78 Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 257.

79 "A Gleam of Hope," *Public Ledger,* September 19, 1878, 2.

80 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 179.

81 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 127.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*

84 "President Langstaff," *Daily Appeal*, October 8, 1878, 1.

85 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association", 165.

before September 7th.[86] With about 300 of the dead, the Howard physicians performed autopsies for the "cause of science" and to better understand yellow fever.[87]

1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic Ends in Memphis

Finally, by early October, the fever subsided due to incoming frost, and by the 29th, the Board of Health finally declared the epidemic to be over.[88] The Howards had already been celebrating the finale of the epidemic with a formal dinner on October 23rd.[89] Their relief efforts would not have been possible without national support. A long receipt of cities gave to the Howard Association, the highest donors including Boston, Philadelphia, and at the top, New York City, with $82,637.01.[90] The Howard Association's prominent reputation, acquired in New Orleans back in 1837, made raising these funds possible. The Howards during this outbreak of yellow fever would spend close to $500,000, employ around 2,900 nurses, and care and supply for almost 8,000 people in and around Memphis.[91] The final toll included 17,000 cases and 5,150 dead.[92]

By 1879, Memphis had lost its city charter. The measure was enacted on January 15th as the result of the mounting debt Memphis had suffered from financial mismanagement. The Daily Appeal thought highly of the repeal as a measure to prevent Memphians from becoming "perpetual slaves" to the current corrupted financial system.[93] In the health department, a new Board of Health had been established, which immediately prompted the department to hire men to clean streets and collect garbage.[94] When disease returned in 1879, the Howards along with the government, were ready for the fight. By November 6th, there were 473 dead and 1,521 cases, a significant reduction compared to the epidemic the year before.[95] Though yellow fever had returned after the great epidemic in 1878, this would be the last time yellow fever would come through Memphis.

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86 "Ledger Lines," *Public Ledger*, September 7, 1878, 2.

87 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 119.

88 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 87.

89 "Our Noble Physicians," *Public Ledger*, October 23, 1878, 1.

90 Keating, "Yellow Fever," 329

91 *Ibid.*

92 Ellis, "Disease and the Destiny of a City," 87.

93 "Repeal of the City Charter," *Daily Appeal*, January 15, 1879, 2.

94 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 234.

95 "Milan Exchange," *The Milan Exchange*, November 6, 1879, 4.

Health Reforms

After this final string of yellow fever, the local Board of Health and the state legislature began surveying the condition of the city while rapidly implementing sanitary reforms. The Board of Health, upon its own local survey, created a plan to clean out or fill privy vaults, which were contaminating cisterns.[96] The official survey was approved by the governor of Tennessee, with shocking results. The survey first discovered the depleted population, which had dropped to about 30,000, considering death rates and emigration.[97] The second discovery was the need to replace decaying streets with hard pavement. The final, and the most revealing, was the requirement to empty sewers and underground drainage, and restructure them to not only remove waste, but to also relieve stormwater. The depleted population is telling, but the other two resolutions ultimately would remove the breeding ground of the Aedes Aegypti mosquito.[98]

State and national laws were the next step for public health reform. President Rutherford B. Hays openly supported national sanitary administration, because the 1878 epidemic "awakened a very general public sentiment" towards public health legislation. After a thorough investigation at the federal level, the Public Health Association Bill of 1879 was passed, which created a National Board of Health.[99] Dr. R. W. Mitchell, former Memphis Board of Health chair and leader of the Howard's Medical Corp, was appointed to be a member.[100] Howard J. W. Cooper desired to organize a national Howard Association,[101] but perhaps with the realization of public health reform, these private organizations were no longer needed.

In the coming years, much more was learned on how to better handle epidemics. The absolute failure of the government to protect its citizens from pestilence stood above all else. The Appeal's analysis of the epidemic states that yellow fever's toll, financially and in its mortality, was "an awful price to pay for the negligence in sanitary affairs, and for the recklessness which disregarded the lessons of 1873."[102] Even with the humanitarian work from the Howards, "no amount of heroism . . . will cover that up or hide from us the responsibility or culpability."[103] However, the unwavering selflessness of private organizations, made up of local citizens, rescued the city from

96 "A Word in Season," *Daily Appeal*, November 8, 1878, 1.

97 Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health*, 112.

98 Falsone, "The Memphis Howard Association," 290–292.

99 W. G. Smille, "The National Board of Health: 1879–1883," *American Journal of Public Health* 33, no. 8 (1943): 926.

100 Baker, "YELLOWJACK," 263.

101 "A Proposed National Howard Association," *Public Ledger*, November 25, 1878, 2.

102 "The Future of Memphis," *Daily Appeal*, October 27, 1878, 2.

103 *Ibid.*

destruction. These lessons learned in 1878 through the charitable work of the Howards and the Citizens' Relief Committee catapulted Memphis, and ultimately the United States, into a public health movement that never retreated.

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