

1878 Memphis Yellow Fever Epidemic

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Essential Question: What factors contributed to the high death rate during the 1878 Memphis yellow fever epidemic?

Tennessee faced many crises in the years following the Civil War, including the deadly 1878 outbreak of yellow fever in Memphis. “Yellow Jack,” as yellow fever was sometimes called, had plagued the United States from its earliest days. An outbreak in Philadelphia in 1793 had nearly stopped the new nation in its tracks as Washington, Jefferson and Adams fled the city to avoid the disease. Alexander Hamilton, who had contracted the disease, was banned from entering New York City out of fear that he would trigger an epidemic there.¹

Yellow fever is a virus spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. The mosquitoes breed in standing water so even the smallest puddle can serve as a breeding ground. The virus operates by entering healthy cells and then using the cell’s components to replicate until the cell bursts. The process is repeated until the host either begins to recover or dies. The first symptom is usually a severe headache followed by a fever that can climb to 105 degrees.² The pulse slows and the intestines and kidneys begin to shut down. Stomach cramps and body aches from severe dehydration come next. Many patients then seem to recover and ask for food. Strangely, those cases are almost always fatal. The cramps return and then become convulsions. As patients die, their livers release bile which turns their skin and the whites of their eyes yellow and gives the disease its name.³ Yellow fever

¹Jeanette Keith, *Fever Season: The Story of a Terrifying Epidemic and the People Who Saved A City*. (New York: Bloomsbury Press) 2012. 7

² World Health Organization, “Yellow Fever Fact Sheet.”

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/yellow-fever> accessed 16 June 2021.

³ Ibid.

emerged as a killer of humans in the jungles of West Africa. Over thousands of years, people living in West Africa developed some immunity to the disease, by enduring repeated outbreaks. However, Europeans had no such immunity.⁴

The slave trade brought yellow fever to North America where it found an abundance of potential victims among both American Indians and Europeans. In the 1700's it was the port cities of New York, Boston and Philadelphia that suffered the worst outbreaks. But as the slave trade shifted south, so too did yellow fever. By the late 1800's, New Orleans and Memphis braced for outbreaks of yellow fever each year.⁵ Memphis was created following the Jackson Purchase in 1819. The city grew slowly until 1832 when the further land cessions by the Chickasaw opened up thousands of acres of prime cotton land in northern Mississippi. Memphis became the cotton capital of the south. During the Civil War, Memphis fell under Union control but the enterprising businessmen of Memphis did not allow that to interfere with commerce. Many of the Northerners who passed through Memphis during the war returned there after the war to take advantage of business opportunities. They were joined by thousands of immigrants, many of them Irish. By 1870, Memphis was the second largest city in the South.

The 1878 outbreak began in Havana, Cuba where ships from West Africa transported mosquitoes along with their cargo. It is thought that the virus of 1878 was a new strain, not seen in North America before. The crew of the Emily B. Souder became infected in Havana and brought the virus to New Orleans. Ships were regularly inspected by quarantine officers before being allowed to make port. However, the captain of the Souder convinced the quarantine officer that his men were suffering from hangovers, not

⁴ Keith, *Fever Season*, 5-6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

yellow fever. The ship was allowed to pass bringing its deadly cargo into the United States.⁶

Effective quarantine was Memphis' most important defense against yellow fever. It failed in 1878 because yellow fever and quarantine were bad for business. By July 4, 1878, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* was asking for money to be spent to enforce a quarantine and improve sanitation to protect the city. "When [yellow fever] really appears, the necessity for a quarantine almost ceases to exist...Is it not better to spend a few thousand as a safeguard than to lose millions to the disastrous effects of yellow fever, besides the thousands of valued lives that will have passed away."⁷ However, many of the leading citizens did not want to see a disruption in trade and refused to spend the money.⁸ Even after reports of yellow fever in Havana and New Orleans were published in Memphis newspapers, many refused to believe that the city was in danger.⁹ On July 29, the Board of Health asserted that "we may safely predict that there will be no danger of yellow fever visiting Memphis."¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.,20-23.

⁷ *Memphis daily appeal. [volume]* (Memphis, Tenn.), 04 July 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045160/1878-07-04/ed-1/seq-4/>> accessed 16 June 2021.

⁸ *Public ledger. [volume]* (Memphis, Tenn.), 12 July 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033673/1878-07-12/ed-1/seq-3/>> accessed 16 June 2021.

⁹ *Ibid.; Public ledger. [volume]* (Memphis, Tenn.), 18 July 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033673/1878-07-18/ed-1/seq-2/>>

Accessed 16 June 2021.

¹⁰ *Public ledger. [volume]* (Memphis, Tenn.), 29 July 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033673/1878-07-29/ed-1/seq-3/>> accessed 16 June 2021.

By the time city leaders realized the danger, yellow fever was already in the city. Memphis had ditches, cisterns and other areas of standing water that allowed the mosquitos to breed. Once the outbreak became public knowledge, the wealthy fled the city in droves leaving the poor to survive however they could. As the fever spread, the doctors and nurses that remained in Memphis were overwhelmed by the numbers of patients. With no effective treatment for the disease, doctors and nurses could do little for their patients. On August 28, 1878, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* reported 50 new cases of yellow fever and 12 deaths. The paper also noted the fever was “breaking out among the colored people who heretofore were believed to be exempt from the disease.”¹¹ At the height of the epidemic, 17,000 of the 19,000 people in the city were sick. Despite President Hayes’ estimation of the crisis as “greatly exaggerated,” hundreds of doctors, nurses and ministers bravely volunteered to care for the sick. Many of them also contracted the illness and died. The sisters of St. Mary’s Cathedral worked tirelessly to care for the sick during the epidemic. The nuns and priests of St. Mary’s who died during the epidemic are known as the Martyrs of Memphis.¹²

The epidemic finally ended in October when a hard frost finally broke the breeding cycle of the mosquitoes. By then over 5,000 people had died in Memphis. The mortality rates for yellow fever varied widely according to race. Among Blacks the mortality rate was 8 percent, but among whites 70 percent of the people who fell sick died. Among the Irish immigrant community, the mortality rate was even higher.

¹¹ *Memphis daily appeal. [volume]* (Memphis, Tenn.), 22 Aug. 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045160/1878-08-22/ed-1/seq-1/>>

Accessed 16 June 2021.

¹² Keith, *Fever Season*, 121-123.

The 1878 yellow fever epidemic had long lasting effects on Memphis. The city lost its charter and was controlled by the state for a short period of time. Successful Black businessman Robert Church bought the first bond to restore the city's charter in 1893. Church also invested in real estate devalued due to the loss of population and became one of Memphis' wealthiest citizens when real estate prices recovered after the epidemic.¹³ Families were fractured by the epidemic. Ida B. Wells, the future suffragette and anti-lynching crusader, became head of her family after losing her parents to the epidemic. Many of Memphis' intellectual and cultural elite decided not to return. Immigrants, who had suffered so terribly during the epidemic, also did not return. Increasingly, Memphis was populated by Blacks and poor whites from rural areas that had been flooded by the Mississippi.¹⁴ The epidemic also led the city fathers to build an innovative sewer system that reduced the number of ditches and privies in which the mosquitoes could breed.¹⁵ Yellow fever would return to Memphis after 1878 until mosquito control efforts eradicated the disease in the United States, but never again would "Yellow Jack" ravage the city as it did in 1878.

¹³ Historic-Memphis "Robert Reed Church," <http://historic-memphis.com/biographies/robert-church/robert-church.html> accessed 09 July 2021.

¹⁴ Ibid., 190-204.

¹⁵ G.B. Thornton, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis, 1879." Public Health Papers and Reports. V. 5, 1879. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2272172/> accessed 16 June 2021.

1878 Memphis Yellow Fever Epidemic

Design a poster on the 1878 Memphis Yellow Fever Epidemic. Include the information in the graphic organizer below in your poster.

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

What were the short-term effects of the epidemic?

What were the long-term effects of the epidemic?

Sample Headline

1878 Memphis Yellow Fever Epidemic Key

Design a poster on the 1878 Memphis Yellow Fever Epidemic. Include the information in the graphic organizer below in your poster. *Answers will vary.*

Who? Anyone could get sick, but; poor were more likely to die because they could not afford to leave

What? Disease carried by mosquitoes originally from Africa. It causes high fever, bleeding and liver damage that gives yellow fever its name.

Where? Enters U.S. at New Orleans travels up Mississippi River to Memphis

When? 1878

What were the short-term effects of the epidemic? Thousands leave Memphis, trade shuts down, over 5,000 people die

What were the long-term effects of the epidemic? Lots of wealthy families don't go back to Memphis; gets improved sanitation system so there are fewer places for the mosquitoes to breed.

Sample Headline

Will Vary

1878 Yellow Fever Primary Sources

The following sources are from the August 26th edition of the *Memphis Public ledger* and the August 27th edition of the *Memphis daily Appeal*. This is roughly one month after the public announcement of yellow fever in Memphis. As students examine the sources, have them consider the following questions:

1. How did yellow fever affect daily life in Memphis?
2. What do the sources reveal about racial attitudes in Memphis?
3. How would news agencies cover a similar outbreak today? What would be the same? What would be different?

Sources: *Public ledger*. (Memphis, Tenn.), 26 Aug. 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress Web. 7 July 2014.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033673/1878-08-26/ed-1/seq-2/>>

Memphis daily appeal. (Memphis, Tenn.), 27 Aug. 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Web. 7 July 2014.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045160/1878-08-27/ed-1/seq-1/>>

Peabody Hotel.

The manager of this establishment, Mr. C. B. Galloway, has made arrangements to keep it open from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Meals can be had at all hours. It is kept on the European plan, and now on a cash basis. Regular meals fifty cents, but any extra orders will be filled at moderate rates. Rooms one dollar per night. This plan will be a great accommodation to the public and will enable Mr. Galloway to keep this excellent hotel open. We commend his enterprise and his nerve in standing at his post. 149†

Mr. C. Y. Stuart
is in charge of
Kahn & Freiberg's Store,
and during the fever
will open at 7:30 a.m.

Close at 7 p.m.

**For bargains in Dry Goods,
Clothing, Boots and Shoes,
Give him a call. 147†**

Holland Gin.

Two one-quarter casks Holland gin, twelve one-eighth casks Holland gin, my own importation, warranted pure and genuine.

JOHN LILLY,
145† 14 Union St., Memphis.

For the accommodation of the few persons remaining in the city we will keep open our store during yellow fever, a kind Providence permitting. Patterson & Ross, grocers, 143 Main street. 4

JNO. A. DENIE, 352 Shelby street, is receiving 200 barrels lime daily. Send in your orders and disinfect. 154

QUERY: "Why will men smoke common tobacco, when they can buy Marburg Bros.' 'Seal of North Carolina,' at the same price?" [eod-xxvii-146

Special Notice.

All persons who wish to go to Refugee Camp Williams, will apply to E. Marshall, 33 South Court street. All persons are urged to go. Train leaves daily at 3:30 in the afternoon. Transportation will be furnished; also, supplies to persons while in camp.

CHARLES G. FISHER,
147†] Ch'm Citizens' Relief Committee.

L. WOELLER'S SALOON,
Corner Main and Washington,
is still open.
Meals 25 cents. 142†

Saturday, August 24.

After this date, until further notice, the LEDGER will not be delivered by carriers. Parties desiring to subscribe can obtain the paper at the LEDGER counting room for the same price by purchasing tickets.

As soon as the epidemic is ended, and the people return, all our routes will be re-established.

THE SCOURGE.

The Fever Spreading--Increase in Death Rate.

143 New Cases and 44 Deaths in 48 Hours.

Large Increase in Number of Cases Among Colored Folks.

The Work of Depopulation Still Progressing.

The Situation Up to Noon in City and Suburbs.

The young ladies of Iuka gave a concert recently for the benefit of fever-stricken people, from which was realized \$142 20, which sum was to day received by Chas G Fisher, chairman of citizens' relief committee, from the committee having the matter in charge.

Sisters Veronica and Dominica, of La Salette Academy, were taken with the fever last night.

Little Jimmie Winters, age 6, was found lying on a door step at the corner of Exchange and Front streets this morning suffering with the fever. His story is that he came in from the camp looking for his brother, whom he did not find. He was carried to the hospital.

A K Gillen, of the citizens' relief committee, is reported in a dying condition to-day.

Dr Frayser has been prostrated two or three days from overwork and a light attack of fever, but is doing well and will be up in a few days.

General W J Smith was resting well at half-past one to-day, and all his symptoms were favorable.

Articles from Public ledger, August 26, 1878

Partial list of new cases of yellow fever reported in last 48 hours.

Nelson Level, 250 Washington.
 Lewis Thilman, age 6, 192 Poplar.
 Arthur Kern, 163 Washington.
 Jane Brown, colored, alley.
 Sally Moffit, age 14, 2 High.
 John Moffit, 2 High.
 Lucy Fritz, age 4, 53 Mosby.
 Laura Legion, colored, 59 Market.
 Phil Brown, age 17, — Madison.
 Mrs M O'Brien.
 John Walton, colored, 151 Washing-
 ton.
 Lucinda Doms, 222 Monroe.
 Anna Bridges, — Adams.
 Mrs Miller, — Alabama.
 Wm Wilstein, Union avenue (out of
 the city).
 Dave Jones, colored, 402 Adams.
 Robert Barron, age 14, — Manassas.
 Sister Dominica, 178 Third.
 Sister Veronica, 178 Third.
 Katie Sturdevant, age 6, 65 Poplar.
 Mrs P G Kennett, 106 Promenade.
 Thomas Magevney, 179 Carroll avenue.
 Martha Grant, colored, 106 Exchange.
 Ed Calhoun, 133 Exchange.
 Son of — Lawrence, 150 Third.
 Jim Grant, colored, 106 Market.
 John Lawless, 28 mulberry.
 Cealy —, colored, age 9, 106 Mar-
 ket.
 Mrs John Bennett, 101 Robeson.
 Mattie Bennett, 101 Robeson.
 Joe Cole, 115 Market.
 Louise Scheiffer, 37 Mosby.
 Jos Kleiner, Exchange Building.
 Mrs John Canepo, 41 Causey.
 Lucinda Robertson, colored, Hum-
 phrey street.

Partial list of deaths from yellow fever reported in last 48 hours.

W H Halstead, age 35, yellow fever.
 Lillie Wilder, age 4, yellow fever.
 Mrs O'Brien.
 Emily Noel, age 79 years, old age.
 Elizabeth Ryan, age 22, yellow fever.
 Walter C Hills, age 24, yellow fever.
 Sarah E Williams, age 39, yellow fever.
 Maggie Williams, age 40, yellow fever.
 Child of Glaentzer, still-born.
 Thomas Winters, age 9 years and 8
 months, yellow fever.
 Daniel Dugan, age 30, yellow fever.
 Mrs John Donovan, age 35, yellow
 fever.
 Mary Glaentzer, age 25, yellow fever.
 R Ben Miller, age 28, yellow fever.
 John Donovan, jr., age 5, yellow fever.
 Mary Welsh, age 50, yellow fever.
 Jerry Heffernan, age 63, yellow fever.
 Patrick Ryder, age 30, yellow fever.
 W James McKeon, age 31, yellow
 fever.
 Catherine Jones, age 70, yellow fever.
 Florence Davis, 18 months, yellow
 fever.
 Mrs Riley, age 40, yellow fever.
 Tom Varner, age 35, yellow fever.
 Ed A Standberg, 6 months, yellow
 fever.
 H S Harrington, age 9, congestion of
 the brain.
 Mary Lynch, age 31, yellow fever.
 George Scales, age 28, congestive
 chill.
 Mary Bettie Bell, age 10, congestive
 chill.

TO PREVENT
Yellow-Fever
TAKE
SIMMONS
Liver Regulator

IT operates upon the Bowels, cleanses the Stomach, purifies the Blood, and eradicates all the obstructions that produce YELLOW-FEVER.

It saved the People of Savannah, Ga., Who Used It During the Terrible Epidemic of 1876.

MESSES. J. H. ZEILIN & CO.,—Gentlemen: We, the undersigned, Engineers on the Georgia Central Railroad, in grateful obligation for the benefits we received from the use of **Simmons Liver Regulator** during the **Yellow-Fever Epidemic** in Savannah, Georgia, in the summer and fall of 1876, desire to make the following statement: That during the aforesaid epidemic we used the medicine known as **Simmons Liver Regulator**, prepared by J. H. Zeilin & Co., and though exposed to the worst miasmatic influences of the Yellow-Fever by going in and coming out of Savannah at different hours of the night, and also in spending entire nights in the city during the prevalence of this most fatal epidemic, with but the single exception of one of us, who was taken sick, but speedily recovered, we continued in our usual good health, a circumstance we can account for in no other way but by the effect, under Providence, of the habitual and continued use of **Simmons Liver Regulator** while we were exposed to this Yellow-Fever malaria.

Respectfully yours,
 C. B. PATTERSON, JAMES L. MALLETT,
 JOHN R. COLLINS, MELTON F. COOPER.

CAUTION.
 The Genuine **Simmons Liver Regulator** or **Medicine** is wrapped in a clean, neat **WHITE WRAPPER**, with the red symbolic letter stamped upon it in the form of a ribbon gracefully curved into the letter Z, embracing the emblems of our trade, Spatula, Mortar and Graduate, with the words **A. Q. SIMMONS LIVER REGULATOR** or **MEDICINE** thereon; also, observe the signature of J. H. ZEILIN & CO., in red ink, on the side. Run no risk by being induced to take substitutes. Take no other but the original and genuine. Manufactured only by **J. H. ZEILIN & CO.**

UNDERTAKERS
 S. H. HOLST. T. W. HOLST.
G. H. HOLST & BRO.



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 Orders by telegraph promptly filled, and cases shipped C. O. D.

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