

# Magnolia Messenger

THE FRIENDS OF MAGNOLIA CEMETERY  
NEWSLETTER

www.magnoliacemetery.com

"Remove not the ancient Landmark"

Summer 2020

## Pandemics Past: Yellow Fever

Mobile has survived over 300 years despite a litany of epidemics and pandemics and our most historic cemeteries are testament to our neighbors who did not.

It seems to have all begun back in 1704 when a vessel called *The Pelican* arrived from Havana. On board were 23 French girls looking for a new life – and a husband. But also aboard was more than cargo and passengers, for it also carried the first known yellow fever epidemic. Several had died en route and others were sick as the ship docked. Little did anyone realize that among the passengers and crew were mosquitoes from Cuba carrying the dreaded fever. As they drifted ashore they infected local mosquitoes, spreading the fever to the shore.

### Gruesome Symptoms

Within four hours of being bitten by one of these mosquitoes a victim would begin showing symptoms: a flushed face accompanied by fever and chills. He either improved or got worse. Jaundice would turn the skin an unhealthy shade of yellow, hence the name. Headaches, muscular pains and severe nausea came next.

As the fever worsened the victim would suffer internal bleeding, delirium, blood trickling from the eyes, nose and ears and finally a hideous black vomit which witnesses likened to coffee grounds. There was no helping the poor soul at this point and only death would end the suffering.

The dead aboard *The Pelican* would have been buried with little ceremony in the large cemetery just outside the city limits. That area today holds the Cathedral and its tree shaded square.

A century passed before a real epidemic struck the settlement known as Mobile. In the summer of 1819 a yellow fever outbreak took 274 lives in barely two months. The entire population had been just 809. The burials quickly filled the old cemetery and land was sought for future burials. The following year the city of Mobile



*Church Street Graveyard was created after the original burying ground near the Cathedral was filled by fever victims.*

obtained land for the Church Street Graveyard and before the transaction was completed the burials had begun.

As the population of cities across the South grew with new arrivals, so did the number of deaths from fever outbreaks. In 1823, the first known quarantine was established by New Orleans against travelers from up river Natchez which was in the throes of yellow fever. All ships were stopped on the Mississippi north of New Orleans and any that defied the order was fined the hefty sum of \$1,000. There were 320 deaths that summer in Natchez.

It was also in 1823 that a Board of Health was established in Mobile. The members met at the end of each fever season (roughly June 1 to November 1) to discuss the previous season's cases and seek preventative measures for the upcoming year. The cooler fall was considered safe and business returned to normal in the Port City.

### Care for the Orphaned

It was in the 1830's that Mobile enjoyed explosive growth but also sought solutions to growing problems. The Samaritan Society was created in 1837. Its volunteers raised money to assist the destitute and sick year round but they were especially busy during the long hot summers. And in 1838 a group of women established the Catholic



*Henry Hitchcock, one of Mobile's richest and most generous citizens was not spared by the 1839 epidemic. His burial was an early one in the city's newest graveyard – today's Magnolia Cemetery.*

Female Charitable Society to educate orphans and assist the poor and they set up separate orphanages for boys and girls near the Cathedral.

The decade ended with the most tragic year in the city's relatively young history. It was in 1839 that arsonists on two occasions set fires causing a total of \$2 million in damages. Sandwiched between those disasters was a long summer filled with death. Between August and early November from 12 to 20 Mobilians were dying each day from yellow fever.

The death toll topped 700 that year, including Henry Hitchcock, one of the state's first millionaires and one of Mobile's most generous citizens. Both Government Street Presbyterian Church and Barton Academy were only completed with his assistance.

The city of Mobile had begun purchasing land to create a new cemetery in 1835 and a city ordinance in 1836 established what today is Magnolia Cemetery with just 36 acres of land. Henry Hitchcock was laid to rest here in the new burying grounds.

### **The Can't Get Away Club**

A group of Hitchcock's friends who lunched together regularly organized the Can't Get Away Club that same year. The idea behind the organization was to assemble a willing band of volunteers who would not evacuate the city in time of epidemics, but would stay behind to assist the sick. In time, the Can't Get Away club was given its own burial lot in Magnolia Cemetery.

Even the faintest rumor of a case of yellow fever had scores of Mobilians rushing to escape. An Episcopal clergyman would later comment: "When the panic struck, social standing, education and even professed Christianity did nothing to overcome the craven selfishness."



*The Protestant Orphan's Asylum was founded as a result of the 1839 epidemic. Today it is Cotton Hall.*

It was also in 1839 that the Protestant Orphan Asylum was established, in great part due to the numerous children left orphaned by the recent yellow fever epidemic. Incorporated by the state in 1840, a cornerstone was laid five years later for their distinctive structure still standing at 911 Dauphin Street. The massive live oak under which the group gathered for the ceremony still shades the lawn fronting present day Cotton Hall.

It wasn't just yellow fever that struck Mobilians. Cases of typhoid, smallpox and consumption (tuberculosis) also took their toll. A pest house had been built on the outskirts of town by the 1840's to isolate and care for those suffering from contagious diseases.

### **1853: The Fever – Even Spring Hill is not Immune**

During the summer of 1853 yellow fever again visited Mobile. The newspapers printed a list daily of the dead. By summer's end the Can't Get Away Club had cared for 1,920 patients and treated 270 of them in infirmaries set up in a local hotel as well as a carriage house. The club received monetary donations for their work from as far away as Boston.



*The Can't Get Away Club – members refused to flee the fever and instead tended to the stricken left behind.*

As the fever raged through Mobile's neighborhoods, city streets of Mobile were largely deserted. Most stores had closed their doors and banks and the post office stayed open just two hours a day. Survivors recalled the mournful tolling of church bells accompanying one funeral after another, seemingly all day long. Ministers were required to maintain the first "social distancing"—standing at least ten feet away from the casket during the funeral.

Spring Hill had always been considered healthy and safe from yellow fever but the 1853 epidemic changed that. In one neighborhood alone 54 of 60 residents came down with the fever. Prominent physician Josiah Nott recorded that in 25 years of practice he had never witnessed anything like it "among a class of people lodged in well ventilated apartments and surrounded by every possible comfort, high on a hill, six miles from the city."

The cause for yellow fever stumped physicians of the day. Blame fell on night air when "poisonous effluvia" was believed most prevalent. These fumes supposedly were emitted by the damp decaying ground; thus the drier sandy soils of Spring Hill were thought safe.

Of course the real culprit was swarming that long humid summer. Mosquitoes were a nuisance but no one would realize their link to yellow fever for decades to come. The only protection at night from the relentless bloodsuckers was cloth mosquito netting draped over a bed. Dr. Nott later recalled that his children often kicked the netting free of their trundle beds and he observed them being bitten by the insects.

### The Nott Family Tragedy

The summer of 1853 took its fatal toll on the Nott family. Four of Dr. Nott's children were stricken. First to succumb was 4-year-old Sarah. The next day Nott's 30-year-old brother-in-law followed by his 10-year-old daughter Emma. Next his youngest, Allen, just two years of age. Finally, his 19-year-old son, Edward. Four children and their young uncle all dead within a week, as one of the region's most noted physicians looked on in what must have been helpless agony.

At Magnolia Cemetery those members of the Nott family are depicted as angels on the monument marking their graves. Nearby a statue of a dog rests, to recall the family pet who faithfully stood beside each sickbed.

By the 27th of October the dreaded fever had ended. A week later residents began returning and the business and social routines of Mobile returned somewhat to normal. The epidemics rarely came again for a few years and residents would be lulled into a false sense of security before another epidemic arrived.



*The Nott children are memorialized on the family monument at Magnolia Cemetery.*

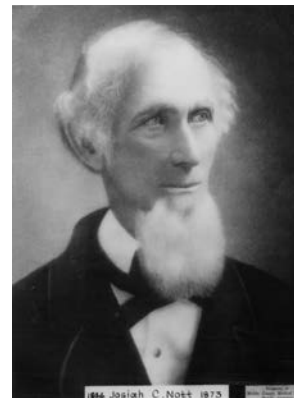
### Quarantine Arguments

Dr. William H. Anderson (1820-1887), president of the Board of Health was criticized for having supported a quarantine during the 1853 epidemic. His response was memorable:

*Commerce brings in nothing but money, and money will not compensate for the loss of our citizens, nor cheer hearts made desolate by death.*

One physician who spoke against quarantines was Dr. George A. Ketchum who in 1855 argued that the fever was not contagious. He promoted the enforcement of sanitary measures believing that would prevent numerous epidemic diseases including yellow fever.

Ketchum's belief in sanitation as well as safe drinking water led to his founding the Bienville Water. Some 30 years later Ketchum would form the Bienville Water Company in 1886. The results were so satisfactory that a group of citizens raised funds to dedicate a fountain in his honor in the center of Bienville Square four years later.



*Dr. Josiah Nott – yellow fever would take four of this physician's children in less than a week. He was helpless to stop it and later suspected mosquitoes were at fault.*



*Dr. George Ketchum argued that yellow fever was not contagious.*

### Popular Theories Abound

It was widely believed that yellow fever spread only after nightfall and was caused by the previously mentioned “poisonous effluvia.” Therefore, during quarantine residents outside its perimeter were welcome to venture into Mobile during the daytime but had to leave before nightfall. A Mobilian recalled taking a message to a bay boat and was told not to even place his foot on the gangplank. He had to call it out to someone on board.

All sorts of measures were thought to assist in preventing the disease. These included sitting in a cold tub of water, wearing camphor or garlic in pockets, eating highly seasoned foods, sucking on lemons throughout the day, drinking large doses of coffee laced with whiskey, or taking care to keep the feet dry. Others swore by closing all the windows and doors and sweating it out. This method may have actually been the best since the real culprit- the mosquito was kept out along with any possible breeze.

If despite these measures a person contracted the dreaded fever the treatments were grim and ineffective and included “copious bleedings” administered by a physician and drinking bitter potions made with magnolia roots.

### Mobile’s Last Bout of Yellow Fever

As the 19th century approached its end, Mobile experienced its last yellow fever outbreak. In July 1897 some cases broke out in the neighborhood around Washington Square but doctors knowing that a panic would ensue kept it quiet.

In six weeks’ time the fever was raging and yellow flags were flying in front of countless homes indicating a family member had been stricken. The panic began.

Before a quarantine could be put in place Mobilians rushed to get out of town via train, boat or on horseback. As word got out about the fever, rail stations north of Mobile refused to let the trains stop. Passengers were packed onto the coaches and in many were standing. Windows were kept shut in the stifling heat and the water supply often ran out.

Any passenger who showed any sign of illness was put off the train. It made no difference if the symptoms had nothing to do with yellow fever. The train stopped, often many miles from the nearest town and the passenger had to fend for himself. Many wandered into a rural community to find men holding guns telling them to “Get out!” And if a passenger died it was likely that the body would be unceremoniously thrown from the moving car. When the train was finally allowed to stop, disembarking passengers stood in line to be inspected by a physician for symptoms. Each was only permitted to carry a single bag which was often fumigated using burning sulphur.

Once scientists discovered that it was the mosquito carrying the fever, major efforts were made to drain swampy areas and eradicate them. The growing use of window screens in the 1890’s was one of the most important changes to occur. Early attempts to cover open windows with cheesecloth had been attempted but found to be unsatisfactory as it tore and soiled easily and obscured the view.

Wire screening at first rusted but by 1893 E. T. Burrowes & Co. of Portland, ME won the top award at the Columbian Exposition for their production of window screens and screen doors. As evidence mounted on the part mosquitoes played in the spread of diseases, screened windows and doors became the norm and many a Southern home had a screened sleeping porch.

Yellow fever epidemics came to an end for Mobile in that summer of 1897 but within 20 years a new killer arrived: the Spanish Flu of 1918. And with the very recent flu pandemic it would seem that no generation is truly safe from epidemics or pandemics despite leaps in medical and scientific research. One thing is sure though: Mobilians have been resilient for over 300 years and will no doubt continue to be.

—Tom McGehee

### From Pratt Patterson, Chair of our Restoration Committee:

*It's been a busy year for the Restoration Committee!*

*Last spring, Stewart Ironworks repaired the remaining iron fencing in need of care in the main cemetery, concluding needed ironwork for the time being. Thanks to the **Aletta Turner Trust**, we have galvanized and installed eight more iron fence sections across the street, also, and will continue to fence that area as we are able. We have also painted the exterior fence facing Ann Street.*

*The **Chicora Foundation** from Columbia, SC and Dr. Michael Trinkley spent two weeks with us in early 2020, conserving the seven "Level 1" need stones, as well as the two most in need of repair in the historic Hebrew Rest section, since it has been and will receive heightened attention in the coming months and years. Level 1 indicates hazardous and unstable conditions. We also repaired two more Level 2 graves to be conserved, for a total of 11. Upon completion of the work, all of the dangerous and unstable graves in the cemetery have been repaired, which has not been the case for many years.*

*Pratt Patterson  
Restoration Committee Chair*



*Recent grave conservation of  
Ludwig Leibman (1804-1868) in Jewish Rest.*



*Recent grave conservation of  
Captain Andrew Olson (1845-1901)  
and L. W. Downe (???-1882).*

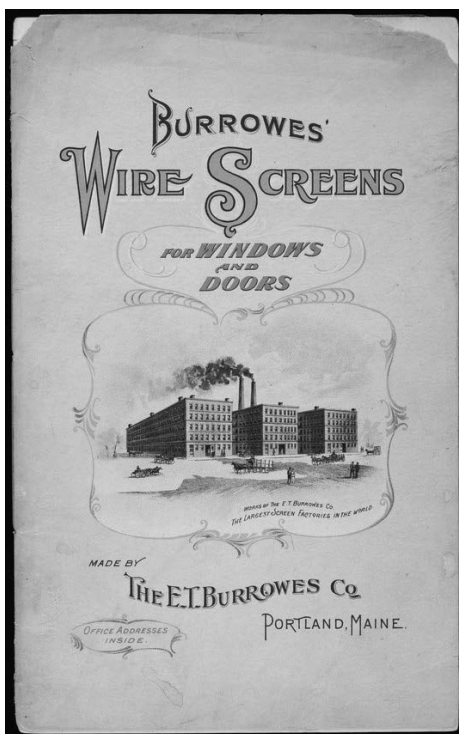


# GIFTS TO THE PERPETUAL CARE TRUST FUND



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Advertisements by E. T. Burrowes & Co. of Portland, ME for wire screens and doors. This invention helped stop the mosquito bites that were causing Yellow Fever.

## ❧ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE ❧

*Dear Friends:*

*In January we had our Annual Board meeting and elected **new Board members** and recognized those who were going off the board: B.J. Lyon, John McCall, John Peebles, Campbell Rayford, and Wythe Whiting. We welcome new member Michael Berson, Meg Fowler, Louise McClelland, William Peebles, and David Rose, and returning Board members Sumner Adams, Thomas McGehee and John Holmes Smith.*

*Mention has been made before about the Friends project, started by Executive Director Janet Savage and Grounds Superintendent, Mark Halseh, called the "**Avenue of Heroes**" where we fly donated casket flags along the main roadways in the Cemetery on the Memorial Day and Veteran's Day Holiday weekends, but I thought an update was in order- we are now up to 116 flags - 5 from past Board Members 48 from local donations, (only 8 buried in Magnolia) and 63 flags from the other states. It is a truly impressive sight to see these large flags flying. Please make a point to come by on these Holidays to see the display. Flag donation is still encouraged, you can call the office for more information.*

*The Friends have installed **8 new iron fence sections** for Magnolia Cemetery Two to the south of the main cemetery. We are still accepting orders for fence sections for memorials or in honor of individuals. If you are interested, please contact the Executive Director, Janet Savage at (251) 432-8672.*

*Please see Restoration Chairman, Pratt Paterson's report in this newsletter.*

*At the moment, no cemetery tours are scheduled for the Fall of 2020, but we will notify the membership if that changes.*

*Just a reminder that we have now entered the summer rainy season and all that precipitation keeps our non-paved roads and alleys impassible, so **please only drive on the paved roads.***

*Douglas Burtu Kearley, Sr.  
President*



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(251) 432-8672

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 I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Friends of Magnolia Cemetery.  
 I would like to make an additional contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to The Perpetual Care Trust Fund.  
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Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Square \_\_\_\_\_ Lot No. \_\_\_\_\_

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