THE DESTRUCTION OF THE QUARANTINE STATION ON STATEN ISLAND IN 1858

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As far as known, the reactions of humanity to the impact of epidemic diseases through the ages have been true to type, an expression of mental perturbation in the face of an overwhelming and seemingly undecipherable calamity. The incantations of the Assyro-Babylonians against the demons of disease fairly pulsate with this spirit of protest:¹ the rhythmus is that of some heaven-storming crescendo in a Beethoven or Tchaikovsky symphony. In like manner, the Hebrews of the Old Testament attributed devastating epidemics to the wrath of Jahveh. The epidemic of dysentery, which assailed the Grecian hosts in the second Iliad, was attributed to the wrath of Apollo, to be propitiated by a sacrifice of beeves and of Trojan youths. In the Middle Ages, the Jews were persecuted for alleged poisoning of wells. During the great plague of Milan (1630), one Guglielmo Pazzi was tortured, broken upon the wheel and burned for alleged dissemination of the pest by smearing the virus upon houses. In some Italian cities, a "column of infamy" (*colonna d'infamia*) was erected at the places where these unhappy victims of popular superstition met their fate. Up to the early 19th century, clergymen continually belabored their congregations with sermons on local or casual epidemics as "scourges of God for the sins of mankind" (Cotton Mather). Some of these sermons are in print and can be seen in medical libraries. The attack on

¹On this head, see Fr. Lenormant: *Chaldean Magic*, London, 1877, *passim*.

the Quarantine Station on Staten Island on September 1–2, 1858,² like the Boston Tea Party or Concord Fight, was in no sense a manifestation of crowd psychology, but the deliberate procedure of a people singularly patient under abuses, but once aroused, apt to be swift, sharp and sudden in reprisals. Of the Americans of this period, the sardonic swindler in Martin Chuzzlewit observed, with a leer: "They do rile up and that's a fact."

The first quarantine establishment in New York State was located by Act of the Colonial Legislature on Bedloe's Island in 1758. In 1796, it was removed to Governor's (then Nutten) Island, but upon the appearance of yellow fever in nearby New York three years later, new measures had to be taken. In 1799, the State Legislature passed an act appointing commissioners to select a new site on Staten Island, appraise the lands seized for this purpose, and erect quarantine hospitals upon them. The inhabitants, through Mr. Micheau, their representative at Albany, strenuously opposed this bill and refused to sell their lands. Nevertheless, the appointed Commissioners proceeded to select and assess damages for some 30 acres selected by them, for which they took a title in fee from the Church of St. Andrew, in the name of the People, by the right of eminent domain. The fat was now on the fire, and for over half a century thereafter (1799–1858) the history of this station is a continuous record of martyrization of the inhabitants by epidemic diseases, set off by futile attempts at legal redress of grievances, baffled at every turn by the cool, steady wire-pulling of interested politicians, who were dead set upon retaining their perquisites and sinecures. In 1800, one year after the establishment of the station, yellow fever broke out among the sparse population living outside the quarantine area, and of the 25 cases, no less than 24 terminated fatally. This sort of thing went on, almost every year thereafter, up to 1848, when the extra-quarantine incidence was 180, with many fatal cases. Yielding to the pressure of repeated protests, the Legislature of 1848 appointed the usual Committee to examine into quarantine conditions, the result of which was an unanimous and elaborate report (1849) to the effect that the Quarantine Station afforded no real protection to New York or Brooklyn, was a menace to Staten Island and "an unjustifiable burden upon Richmond County," with a

²The present account of this occurrence is derived from a pamphlet in the Library of the New York Academy of Medicine, entitled: "Facts and documents bearing upon the legal and moral questions connected with the recent destruction of the Quarantine buildings on Staten Island. By the Executive Committee of Staten Island." 90 pp. 8°. New York, Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1858. The copy of this pamphlet in the Surgeon General's Library (Washington, D. C.) has been lost or mislaid. If any physician or bookseller can supply this missing item, the opportunity to purchase it will be much appreciated by the Librarian, Surgeon General's office.

recommendation for its immediate removal. Meanwhile, yellow fever broke out again, ravaging the Island with unprecedented violence and spreading to nearby cities. The Legislature, therefore, ignored the determined opposition of the shipping interests, and on April 10, 1849, passed an "Act for the establishment of hospitals at Sandy Hook." But, through the subterranean hostility of interested parties, no definite action was ever taken, the expressed will of the people was defeated, and the law remained a dead letter on the statute book up to the events of 1858. In the summer of 1856, there was another frightful epidemic of yellow fever, numbering 538 cases around New York, of which 93 were on Staten Island, with a mortality of one third the total cases. As several distinguished citizens were victims, another Act was passed by the Legislature (on March 6, 1857) for the removal of the Quarantine Station, but the execution of this law was again baffled by the sinister influences still at work. At this time, through successive legislature enactments, the Health Officer is said to have been vested with more power than had even been delegated to any other official in the State. In consequence, there was great corruption in the pratique of quarantine, with a view to increasing the graft of this official by monopolies connected with the lightering of cargoes, arbitrary retention of vessels and passengers at enormous expense and venal accordance of releases from pratique to those who paid well for the privilege. Quarantine had thus become a farce. Of actual segregation, there was little or none. Stevedores and passengers from suspected vessels were permitted to pass over to New York and Brooklyn by ferry or otherwise, and within the crowded quarantine grounds, the sick and well were always in dangerous proximity. All this was set off by most virtuous claims of a rigorous enforcement of quarantine in the newspaper press, the old stereotyped humbuggery of *bonne mine au mauvais jeu*. To protect the lives of citizens, the Board of Health of Castleton made regulations and erected buildings to prevent intercourse between persons inside and outside the Quarantine enclosure. Under cover of similar regulations, the Health Officer actually connived at destruction of these barriers by mob violence, and procured the release of the offenders upon arrest, *via writ of habeas corpus*. The "Rattler," an infected vessel, which the Mayor of New York had driven from the harbor, was permitted to anchor near the ferry landing of Staten Island and many cases were traced to this and other laxities of administration. At length, the Board of Health of Castleton passed a resolution declaring the Quarantine Station to be an intolerable nuisance, and calling upon "the citizens of the county to abate it without delay." Thus matters stood at the end of August, 1858. On the nights of September 1 and 2, Ray Tompkins and John C. Thompson set fire to the Quarantine buildings and destroyed them. The patients had already been removed from the buildings before ignition, and were

sheltered and cared for by physicians. The only person killed was shot by an employee of the Station. The culprits were duly arrested, charged with arson, tried, and released by decision of Judge Metcalfe on October 7. The summing up of the judge is a masterpiece of legal argumentation. It was shown from the evidence gathered by an appointed committee, and by the sworn testimony of many resident physicians, that the abuses endured by citizens of the Island for over 50 years were intolerable, that the destruction of the buildings was a virtual enforcement of the two thwarted acts of 1849 and 1857, that the resolutions of the Board of Health of Castleton were guarded and virtually authorized by the Session Laws of 1798 and 1850, and that apart from the broad legal principle, *Salus populi suprema lex*, there was abundant legal precedent to the effect that the commission of an "act of salutary and well-intentioned violence" implies exemption from responsibility "upon every ground of justice and of positive law." The prisoners were therefore released and Staten Island was at last relieved of the nuisance which had tormented and destroyed its citizens for over half a century.

At this time of day, it would be cheap and easy to descant upon the ignorance then obtaining as to the real cause of the trouble. It has been well said that we feel towards and think backwards: our hindsight is better than our foresight. The famous initial regulations for 30-day quarantine against plague at Ragusa (1377) and 40 days (*quaranta giorni*) at Marseilles (1383) and Venice (1403), failed through ignorance of the actual nature of carriers. But in 1858, all that was known of mosquito transmission of fevers was the intuitive feeling, which even the Romans had, that marshes, if not mosquitoes, had something to do with it. Lancisi (1707) and Nott, of Mobile (1848), had even written monographs on the subject, but the general theory of malarial infection was that of a vague "miasm" or vapor emanating from the swamps, and that the darkness of night was essential to its potency (J. K. Mitchell, 1849). In 1880, the late Col. J. S. Billings pointed out that the symptoms of yellow fever suggest an infection like that of snake-bite, that the cause may be an organism like the yeast plant, with a product like alcohol, that the disease always occurs near wharves, piers, ships and decaying buildings or refuse, that clouds of smoke from burning fomites are as the very wings of pestilence, that shaking of textiles in cold outside air will avail to disinfect them, and that there is much in the old farmer's adage: "Yellow fever can't get anywhere unless yer tote it." This was still a far cry from the demonstration of the actual vector of the disease by Walter Reed and the U. S. Army Board in 1900. In the light of these facts, the action of the citizens of Staten Island in 1858 needs no justification. As the late King Edward VII observed: "The Americans are a much enduring people."