

# **“A SNEAKY, COWARDLY ENEMY”: TAMPA’S YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC OF 1887-88**

by Eirlys Barker

Florida’s mild, sub-tropical climate has long received praise as delightful and healthful. However, it also fostered tuberculosis, malaria, and other endemic tropical diseases, for which there was no known cure in the nineteenth century. Periodic visitations of dreaded epidemic diseases added to the health hazard. Indeed, prior to the twentieth century, certain diseases affected the pattern of Florida’s development.

Yellow fever was a particularly feared disease during the last century, for it was a killer with horrible, painful symptoms. Since its cause was unknown, it became mysterious. The variety of symptoms and its unpredictable course added to its mystique. Not until 1901 were yellow fever’s secrets revealed with the discovery that it was transmitted by one species of mosquito, the *Aedes Aegypti*. The actual nature of the microorganism was not fully understood until the 1920s, but after 1901 it was clear that effective mosquito control could eliminate yellow fever in areas where it had been a frequent killer.<sup>1</sup>

The Tampa Bay area has always been known for its mosquitoes. Indeed, it was originally part of Mosquito County. In setting up the area’s first permanent fort in November 1823, Colonel John Mercer Brooke received orders to do so before the “sickly season” began in April. Fort Brooke’s early cases of “yellow jack” were sporadic, involving soldiers who were transferred from other cities and garrisons in the South.<sup>2</sup> Until the late 1850s, the fort and the town of Tampa that grew up around it were not large enough to sustain and fuel the spread of the disease. Despite Tampa’s reputation as a “perfect Arcadia,” being “relatively free from disease,” it experienced some cases in 1839, 1841 and 1849. In 1853, 1858 and 1867, as the town grew, substantial epidemics occurred, with over 200 cases in each year. Nevertheless, yellow fever was regarded as just another hazard of living in the South, and its appearance did not halt the development of Tampa any more than it hampered growth of other cities in the region. Tampa was still more healthful than its main ports of contact, Pensacola, Key West, Havana and New Orleans. However, Tampa increasingly imported the disease from these areas as trade grew.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a local newspaper’s assurance in May 1871 that “the health throughout this section of country was never better,” a severe outbreak occurred in the fall with forty cases and ten deaths. This epidemic introduced a young local doctor, John P. Wall, to the disease, for he sickened after attending a cabin boy on the *H. M. Cool*, which had arrived from fever-afflicted Cedar Keys. Wall survived, but his wife and infant daughter died. He was later recognized both statewide and nationwide as an authority on yellow fever, and he was the leading physician in Tampa until the 1890s.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-1880s, Tampa was a far different town than the settlement described by Silvia Sunshine only a few years earlier as “the remains of Tampa.”<sup>5</sup> As a result of the arrival of the cigar industry, Tampa was fast becoming a full-fledged city. However, with an expanded



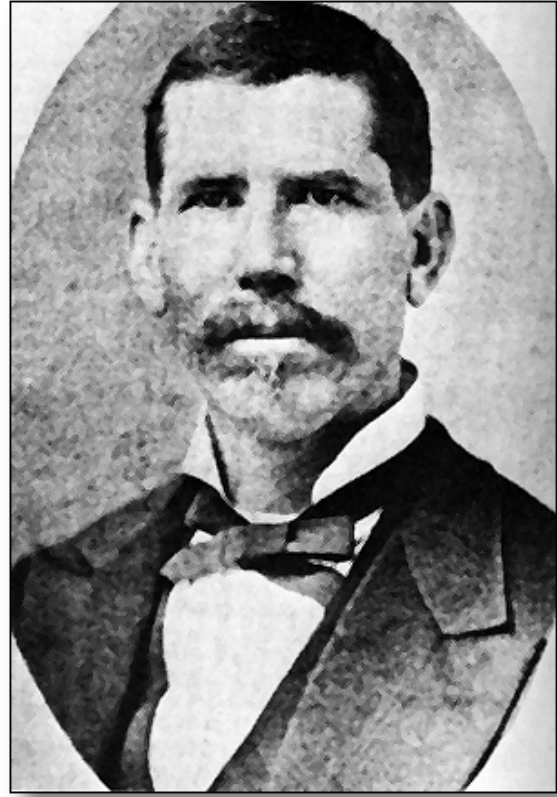
A graphic presentation of the scourge of “Yellow Jack” pulling down Florida disrupting trade, as “Columbia” comes to the rescue. Drawing by Matt Morgan from *Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine*, 1873.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives.

population and increased outside contact came an epidemic which took Tampan by surprise. The town had been free of yellow fever since 1871, and citizens had grown accustomed to hearing doctors, editors and other public figures minimize the possibility of future epidemics. It was almost inconceivable that economic advancement—that sign of God’s favor to this Protestant community—was not a harbinger of continuing prosperity. The complacency of Tampa’s citizens led many to denounce and abuse those that first declared that yellow fever had returned to the town in 1887.

In May 1887, the news reached Tampa that fever had broken out at Key West. As the number of cases increased there, a panic enveloped Tampa. The city imposed a prohibitive quarantine against persons, baggage and freight, except for tobacco and the U.S. mail, originating in Key West and Havana. By June 9, the Hillsborough County board of health had set up a quarantine camp at Ballast Point. Passengers from Key West and Havana were detained there for fifteen days. The Plant Investment Company, in a progressive yet pragmatic, effort to protect both its extensive investment in the town's future and its profitable steamship connections, paid for the tents, cots and provisions.<sup>6</sup>

However, leading citizens considered it an over-reaction to the situation when Jacksonville inflicted a quarantine on all people from Tampa. This action was protested by the editor of the *Tampa Weekly Journal*, Harvey Cooper, who claimed that it hurt the “Hotel Interest.”<sup>7</sup> Cooper seemed especially concerned about Henry Plant’s plans for building a magnificent hotel at Tampa to attract thousands of tourists—and millions of dollars—every winter. In defense of this vision, Cooper sarcastically reported that the city was no longer in a state of panic, and “the people are laughing at their own foolishness. . . Only one death in Tampa since—the Lord only knows when, and that occurred last Sunday. It was a mule. It would be dangerous for Jacksonville to lift their quarantine against Tampa yet awhile.”<sup>8</sup>



**Dr. John P. Wall.**

Photograph from *Tampa: A Pictorial History* by Hampton Dunn.



**The Quarantine Station in Tampa Bay.**

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Nevertheless, Tampa continued to deal with the effects of the Key West epidemic. The U.S. Marine Hospital Service established a refugee station on Egmont Key early in July 1887. By July 11, twenty refugees had arrived from Key West as a part of the “depopulating” process. This term described a program in which non-immunes—persons who were not natives of an endemic area and, therefore, had never been in contact with the disease—were evacuated from infected cities. This tactic had long been the army’s response to yellow fever, but was obviously not as easy to accomplish in a large city, especially one with very few immunes.

As later reported by Dr. Wall, a local black attendant working at the Egmont station took sick and other cases ensued. One death occurred among thirty or so individuals detained there in August. Rumors surrounding this fatality fed the local panic, and to further heighten the alarm, smallpox broke out in Cuba. However, Tampa was spared the catastrophe of a double epidemic.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the threat, public officials remained confident that yellow fever would pass them by once more. The local correspondent for Jacksonville’s *Florida Times-Union* reported in September that “business is beginning to pick up and the indications are that our merchants will do a lively business this fall.”<sup>10</sup> Key West’s epidemic was on the decline by mid-August, but Dr. Wall believed that, as a result, “more or less clandestine communication between Key West and Tampa and other points on the Gulf Coast” had begun. Wall thought that the existence of a

quarantine had paradoxically triggered this illegal traffic, and that it was this traffic, not the legitimate trade by way of Plant's steamers, which was the source of the infection. Wall believed the Plant Line had taken enough precautions so that it was in no way responsible for the epidemic. Its ships did not remain in Havana at night during quarantine season; baggage and freight were fumigated with sulphur on board the ships; and the line excluded all suspect individuals and their goods.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Wall was always as much a business booster as a physician, and he was extremely competent in both roles. He was conscious that this period was crucial to Tampa's development. Cigar manufacturer Vicente Martinez Ybor's recent investment in the area was obviously profitable, and the Plant steamers had been making twice-weekly runs between Tampa and Havana through Key West since February 1886. They had already brought some two thousand Cubans to settle in Ybor City.

Charlie Turk of Ybor City had the dubious distinction of being the first person in Tampa to die of "yellow jack" in 1887. An alleged fruit smuggler, he managed a barber shop.<sup>12</sup> His family contended that he had contracted the disease by using a blanket belonging to an Italian fruit dealer named Pepe. Pepe, it was said, had fallen ill with strange symptoms, but had recovered and mysteriously disappeared.<sup>13</sup> While Turk was still lying ill in Ybor City, the first case within Tampa proper occurred on September 16, when a second Italian fruit dealer, Louis Moses, took sick. Other Italian traders soon followed. Possibly six Italians contracted yellow fever, as did a few of their American customers.

Dr. Wall was out of town when Turk and Moses had become sick. When the physician returned on the twenty-fifth, the town was seething with rumors of the scourge's presence. Wall immediately suspected the worst. By September 29, Wall had seen five suspicious cases, including two that other physicians had diagnosed as bilious remittent fever. However, he deemed it "prudent to await further developments," for "it is a very serious thing to announce the presence of yellow fever." Of the suspicious cases in September, only Turk's had been fatal which suggested that dengue—a non-fatal disease with symptoms similar to yellow fever—might have been the cause. Therefore, Wall continued to observe possible cases, and he did not make the fateful declaration until all his doubts had disappeared.

That point was reached on October 4, by which time he had seen a total of seven cases. Two patients had died, and albumin in the urine—a typical symptom of yellow fever—was present in two other cases. Summoning the board of health, Wall announced his diagnosis. He noted that this was received "with many objections, on the part of the other members, on the ground that the city was very healthy, hardly anybody was sick, and that very few deaths had occurred, certainly not as many as might be expected in so large a population." Wall conceded that there was no epidemic yet, but he hoped to avoid one by depopulating the city and by urging all non-immunes to flee. He wanted this implemented before the news leaked out by wire, so that those leaving would not be denied refuge everywhere they went.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, Wall prevailed. On October 5, he began spreading the news to local citizens, while the board of health went beyond his suggestions and declared that epidemic proportions had already been reached. A few of Tampa's citizens had fled even before this date. On October 4, a

Jacksonville paper reported that a refugee from Tampa died at Palatka and around one hundred of Palatka's citizens had, in turn, fled from that City.<sup>15</sup> Fear, it seems, was as contagious as yellow fever.

Roby McFarlan, a Tampa resident, recorded the developing crisis in her diary. On June 1, she noted that there was a "great scare of yellow fever." From June to September 21, she reported only her daily housekeeping activities, such as "clean kitchen, scald roaches," but she mentioned that "mosquitoes [were] bad." On September 21, however, she wrote that a "man died of yellow fever at Ybor City." Five days later she reported another death in Ybor City. For October 5, her entry read: "Beautiful day, sunshine hot. We work, get dinner, then a report of yellow fever in town. Mr. McKenzie sick, he died this eve, people scared." The following day, she wrote that Mr. Sprinkle had died and was "buried soon. People moving out of town. . .Nania Hill sick with fever, a great many sick with the fever." On October 7, Roby saw Dr. Wall who told her "the fever was yellow fever, and advised all the people to get out of town." She added, "No more deaths as yet, a great many sick."<sup>16</sup>

The McFarlan family took Wall's advice and stayed with friends eight miles from Tampa. The family had still not returned to their home when Roby ended her diary in April 1888. Her husband visited Tampa at intervals, but always during the day, as the board of health advised. Roby continued to record the number of cases as they were reported to her. Her diary makes it clear that ordinary citizens were convinced from the outset that the disease was yellow fever, and they were quite prepared to flee. Unlike the city fathers, they had no economic motive for hiding the epidemic's presence. Their lives and good health were more important to them than the continued growth of the city.

A more laconic account of these events was kept in the diary of a local farmer, James H. Metcalf, who lived just north of Tampa. On October 5, 1887, he reported: "Yellow fever panic in town. A.B. McKenzie died." Three days later he wrote: "Went to Tampa with Charlie Shockley. Yellow fever plenty." On November 4, Metcalf casually mentioned the subsequent death of his friend, Shockley, without any personal comment.<sup>17</sup>

On October 6, 1887, the *Tampa Journal* admitted that panic gripped the city. "There is no use denying the fact that the people of Tampa are panic stricken," the Journal observed. "Whether our fears are well-founded remains to be determined." The newspaper mentioned the "general and exciting exodus" and reported that scores of people had left on the northbound train the previous evening. However, the *Journal* tried to minimize the threat by stating "the fact that we are having an epidemic of Dengue fever." Conceding that "three cases of an aggravated type. . . have proved fatal," the paper declared that "many people have jumped to the conclusion that we have Yellow fever."<sup>18</sup> Five days later the *Journal* emphasized that dengue was raging throughout Florida and in Savannah, implying yet again that Tampa's epidemic was due to the milder, less feared disease. "Do not become too much excited," the editor advised residents who had not fled, but he added: "If you are frightened, run. It can do no harm, and there is nothing like being on the safe side."<sup>19</sup>

On October 8, Tampa's epidemic made the front page of the *New York Times*. Noting the "wild excitement" in the city, the Times did not doubt that the disease was yellow fever. "The fever seems to have supplanted reason, no one seemingly knowing what treatment to adopt, and

**Tampa's epidemic makes headline news in New York City.**

everyone, even physicians, seeking safety in flight,” the *Times* reported. “The city is now virtually deserted. . .The panic was so great, that, in many instances, thousands of dollars worth of property was left unprotected.”<sup>20</sup>

The depopulation tactics used by Wall and the county board of health became a matter of controversy. Almost immediately, Jacksonville’s *Times-Union* attacked officials who “deliberately betrayed their trust,” so that the “people of Tampa are stampeded all over the country from the Mississippi River to New York.” The paper’s editor called for “a rigid investigation” to see if the stampede was the result of “a pardonable mistake, or an inexcusable blunder, or worse.”<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Wall contended that refugees “magnified the true condition of things in Tampa.” He also noted those who had stayed behind abused him for declaring the disease’s presence, especially since none of the other local doctors initially concurred with him. Wall persuaded the mayor, George B. Sparkman, to send a request for aid to the U.S. Marine Hospital at Key West. On hearing the news, Dr. Joseph Y. Porter, the health officer for the city of Key West, came to Tampa to aid Wall. Porter had extensive experience with the disease, having suffered from it himself in 1867. He also brought trained yellow fever nurses, both male and female, with him and shared Wall’s popular abuse when he concurred with Wall’s diagnosis. By October 14, Porter and Wall agreed that the disease was yellow fever, but they found it difficult to estimate the number of cases. Dr. Leslie Weedon, one of Tampa’s recent arrivals, thought that there were already a hundred cases, and Wall believed there were at least fifty.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Tampa’s city council had taken steps to deal with the mounting crisis. On October 6, it appointed an executive committee to take charge of affairs and to “fill any vacancies that might occur.” This committee, composed of council members Silas L. Biglow, William B. Henderson and Frederick M. Meyer, soon provided “means to meet urgent sanitary and other expenses.”<sup>23</sup> The committee appropriated \$500 for this work and appointed Captain F.W. Edmonds as Sanitary Inspector. The city council also set up a relief committee, comprised of J.W. Giddens, T.W. Givens and the city clerk, Lamont Bailey, to aid the “destitute poor.”<sup>24</sup> The committee coordinated its work with a volunteer group, the Citizens Relief Committee, which had been created “for the purpose of relieving the wants of the sick and destitute during the prevalence of Yellow Fever.”<sup>25</sup> The Relief Committee soon became the only aid organization when the city’s official committee merged with it.

Despite these efforts, city officials came under attack. “Tampa appears to have a fine set of city officials,” the *Times-Union* observed sarcastically. “Nearly all of them skipped in the first stampede, and Dr. Wall says that in spite of infection being all over the place, the city authorities are doing nothing.”<sup>26</sup> Two days later, the Jacksonville paper reported there was “no concert of actions between the board of health, the town council, and the city’s committee.” This type of confusion was common in nineteenth-century communities afflicted by epidemic diseases. Too often, no civic agency had the power or funding to act decisively, and the flight, sickness or death of local officials added to the general confusion.<sup>27</sup> Officials “who had shown the white feather” by mid-October included Mayor Sparkman, County Judge C.E. Harrison, W.B. Henderson, H.L. Knight and J.E. Mitchell. However, others such as I.S. Giddens and Lamont Bailey remained at their posts. Their actions were all the more heroic in view of the fact that they



FRANK LESLIE'S  
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NEWSPAPER

No. 1106—THE LATEST

NEW YORK—FOR THE WEEK ENDING SEPTEMBER 4, 1896.

Price, 10 Cents. 112276.



THE YELLOW FEVER INCIDENT IN FLORIDA.—SCENE AT A RAILWAY STATION.—TURNING BACK REFUGEES.  
FROM A PHOTO BY EDWARD BROWN.—SEE PAGE 12.

**Turning back refugees fleeing a Florida community struck by yellow fever.**

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

and members of their families contracted the disease. Mayor Sparkman angrily answered the charges against him as “a falsehood from beginning to end,” claiming he returned to town by day. Sparkman admitted that five city officials had fled, but he emphasized that six had remained.<sup>28</sup>

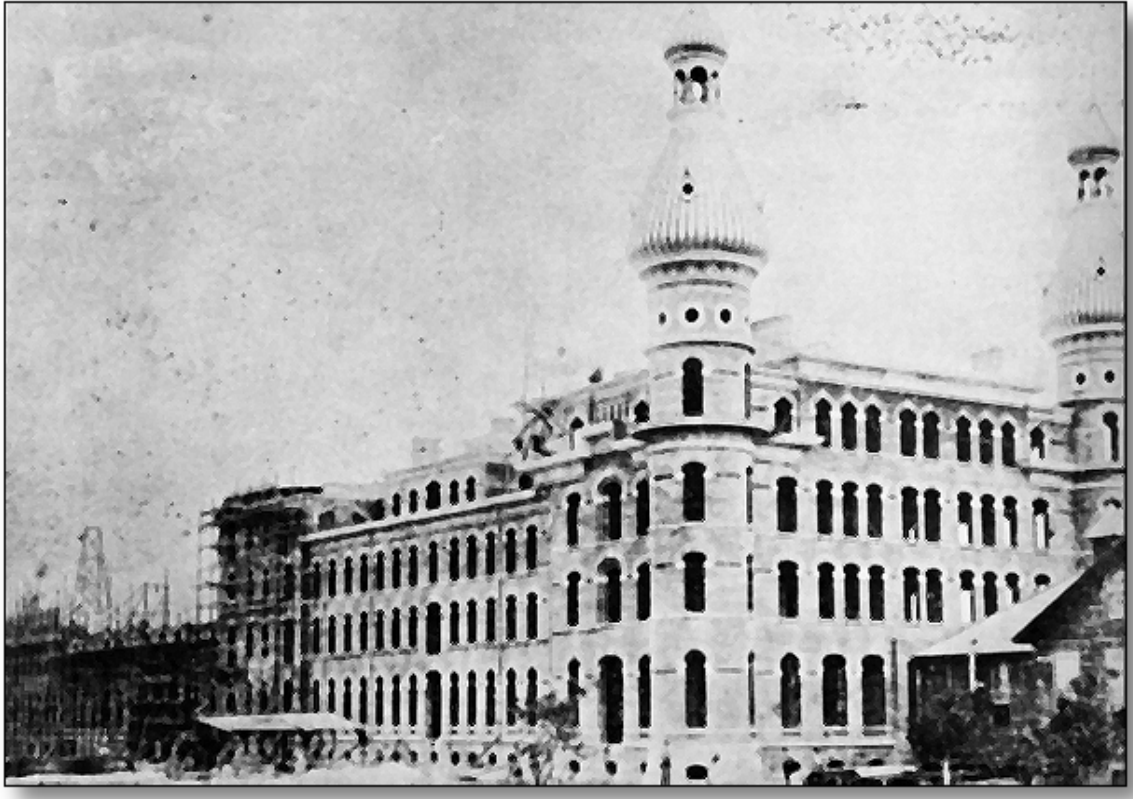
Newspapers dealt in different ways with the epidemic. The *Tribune* reported the total number of deaths. The *Tampa Journal* did not print specific figures and mentioned only the names of the dead or stricken if they were members of the local elite. Its editor was more interested in reporting positive action, such as the erection of a “comfortable hospital building,” costing \$500, to take charge of single men and others without family. However, there was no more talk of dengue. Jacksonville’s *Times-Union* was free to be more precise, and it published the official reports of the board of health, as did the *Fort Myers Press*.<sup>29</sup> By Oct. 20, even the *Journal* conceded that an epidemic of yellow fever was under way. Business in Tampa had virtually stopped, although Hugh Macfarlane was later commended for having kept his store open and charging fair prices.<sup>30</sup>

Even in the darkest days of the sickness, the *Journal’s* editor remained optimistic about Tampa’s future. He thought it would “require more than a mild epidemic, like the one through which we are now passing, to blot Tampa from the face of the earth and to blight its prospects for becoming one of the great cities of Florida and the South.”<sup>31</sup> Tampa’s cigar factories did not close, and tobacco was exempted from the list of articles that had to be quarantined and fumigated. Henry Plant announced that he was going ahead with his plans for the hotel, and building began in what would otherwise have been Tampa’s gravest hour. Plant even suggested that if the state legislature held a special session to standardize quarantine regulations throughout Florida, he would pay for the cost of that session. No action was taken, however, since the regulations did not affect many prominent businessmen in the northern part of the state and the matter was not regarded as urgent outside the Tampa Bay area.<sup>32</sup>

Kittie Lea, whose account of this period was written decades later, recalled that both Dr. Wall and Dr. Porter treated the sick in her home. Mrs. Lea herself was immune, as she had had the fever in Mobile seventeen years earlier. Her husband, Henry, and her son, Algernon, contracted the disease in 1887, but both survived. The youngest son, Willie, experienced very mild symptoms in the summer of 1888. Mrs. Lea recorded that the disease “would spread like a forest fire, blaze up, skip or take one or two in a thinly settled place and break out in unexpected spots, taking entire families, then die down for a few days, when we would hear of another case, so the dread of it never left us. As long as there was material to feed the horrible disease it would last.”<sup>33</sup>

The epidemic continued to take its toll. By October 24, Roby McFarlan, in her country retreat, had “heard there had been 80 cases of yellow fever.” Four days later she wrote of “Forty-eight deaths.” On October 27, there were nineteen patients in the hospital. Other than Wall, all the Tampa doctors were stricken with the fever. The *Journal* mentioned on the 27th that Dr. Weedon was recovering, and Roby McFarlan noted that “Dr. Mitchel died.”<sup>34</sup>

The *Journal* advertised for nurses, stating that they would be paid by the Citizens Relief Committee, of which Hugh MacFarlane had become head by the end of October. The Relief

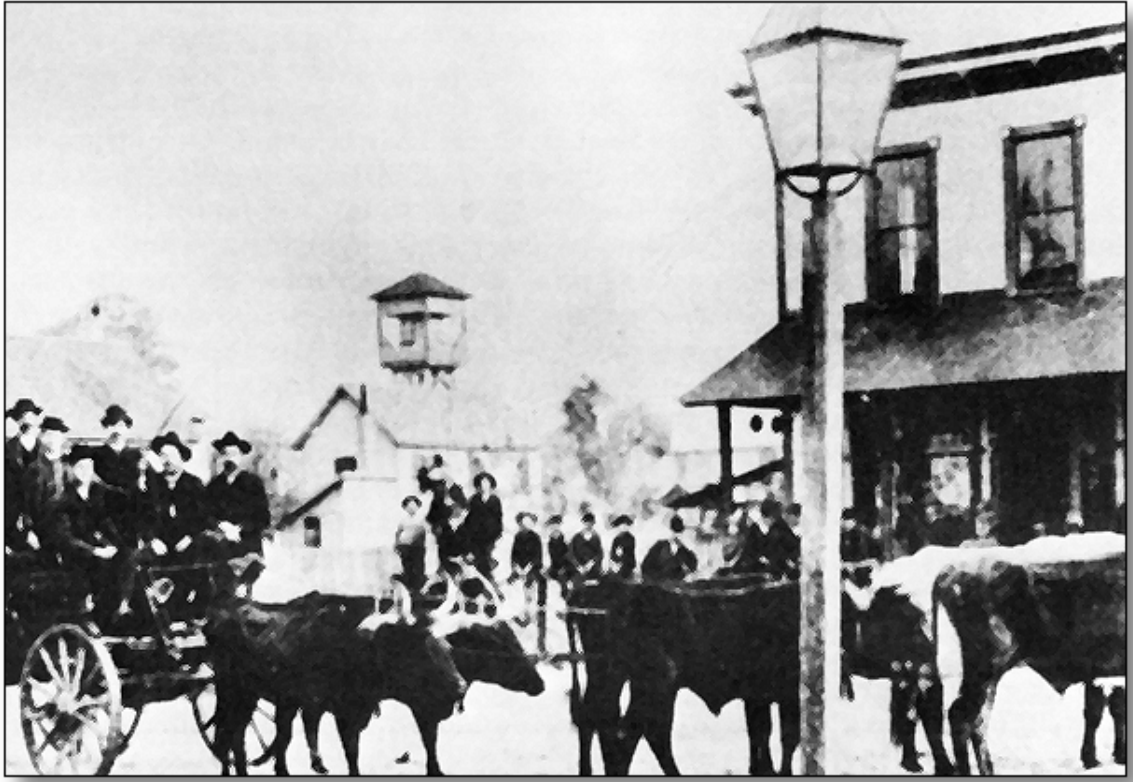


**Tampa Bay Hotel under construction in 1890.**

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Committee's minutes recorded a list of nurses, how much they were paid, and where they were placed. Both males and females, white and black, were used. Some nurses received more than others. Sarah Scott, white, received three dollars an hour, while other, probably black, nurses, like Drusilla Jackson, received only half that amount. Patients who could afford to pay for the service of such nurses were expected to do so, but the Relief Committee paid for those without means.<sup>35</sup> The *Journal* noted on November 3 that Relief Committee member Isaac Howard was responsible "to the colored people." The committee furnished bread and wood to those in need. The unemployed could receive provisions by cleaning the streets. As a result, the *Journal* believed that the city "will be so clean in a few more days that the buzzards will have to apply to the Relief Committee."<sup>36</sup>

One of the sadder events was the death of nineteen-year-old William Cline on November 26. He had served on the Relief Committee until stricken, and the *Journal* praised him as a hero and true Christian. For seven long weeks he had helped the victims of the disease, giving "freely of his own funds" to those in need. The family gravestone at Oaklawn Cemetery touchingly identified him as "Willie Cline."<sup>37</sup>



**A committee, appointed by the state legislature, making a yellow fever inspection in Lakeland during 1887.**

Photograph from *Yesterday's Polk County* by Louise K. Frisbie.

On November 20, a light frost occurred. Most citizens took this as heralding the end of the epidemic, and refugees began to return. The *Journal*, however, warned on November 24 that “THIS WILL NOT DO.” Following the cautious path, the city council passed an ordinance the same week to prohibit the refugees’ return until the county board of health declared the city safe. Still, things were improving. The emergency hospital closed on December 1, and Dr. Porter made preparations to leave. On December 19, the city council repealed its ban on returning refugees, but without the concurrence of the county board of health, which by this time practically consisted of Dr. Wall alone. Wall stated later that it was too soon for refugees to return because cases still existed and fatalities were occurring on the outskirts of Tampa. He later recorded that there was a considerable number of cases among those who “came rushing back into town” in December.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the month, the *Journal* declared that “Tampa is blooming again.”<sup>39</sup> This opinion was not universal, however. A week later, Bartow established a quarantine against Tampa. “If true,” said the *Journal*, “our neighbor must be hard run for business, as such an action at this time is exceedingly small. Who wants to go to Bartow anyway?”<sup>40</sup>

Early in January 1888, the *Journal* mentioned “three or four” cases of sickness in town, but the paper still tried to calm fears and advised refugees to come home. By the second week of the

month, immigrants were again coming from Havana and Key West. Over one hundred cigarmakers arrived on the Plant steamer Olivette on January 12, to work in a new factory in Ybor City. The Board of Trade also resumed its meetings by this date as did the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Schools reopened during January.<sup>41</sup> The last fatality in the Relief Committee records occurred on January 11, 1888. In all, the committee recorded ninety-five deaths, but yellow fever had probably caused many other fatalities which were attributed to dengue in the first few weeks.

Dr. Wall made it clear that the epidemic was indeed over, but sporadic cases continued around Tampa throughout the late winter and early spring of 1888. He saw stricken patients throughout January, and Dr. Jackson confirmed a fatality on January 30. A case seen by Wall in April 1888 clearly reinforced his belief about the disease's means of transmission. The patient lived on the outskirts of town and was a member of a family that had been stricken at the height of the epidemic. Wall reported that the family was poor, living in a house shaded from the sun, "and nothing had been done in the way of disinfecting after the epidemic." Wall had mattresses destroyed and linens disinfected, and the inhabitants moved away temporarily. He regarded these actions as sufficient to prevent further spread of the disease. He emphasized disinfection and fumigation of clothing throughout his report.<sup>42</sup>

If Wall had earlier thought that the disease was transmitted by mosquitoes, he had apparently abandoned that theory by 1887. Towards the end of his report, Wall noted that an 1888 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* "pretty fully express[es] my view" on the subject of the disease. The article reflected the standard medical position that miasma, or contingent contagion in the atmosphere, carried the disease in a certain locality. As it was atmospheric, non-intercourse could not work, and to attempt quarantine with its resultant disruption of commerce "would be a greater misfortune than yellow fever."<sup>43</sup> Wall had already declared that quarantine was "an absurdity," because the disease was localized and to keep non-immunes in an infected area was to let them "die like dumb brutes."<sup>44</sup> Good sanitation was the only answer.

During 1888, Tampa was the source of epidemics in the neighboring communities of Seffner, Mango, Palmetto, Plant City and Manatee. Dr. Wall believed that Manatee's outbreak was the source of Tampa's 1888 cases, but that town had been first infected from Tampa. In October 1887, a six-year-old Manatee girl, Vera Tubbs, and her mother, "whose reputation was not of the best," visited Tampa. On returning home, Vera became ill. She was regarded as the source of the Manatee outbreak.<sup>45</sup> Wall believed that between October and Christmas, sixty cases with about eight deaths occurred in Manatee.<sup>46</sup>

Adin E. Waterman, a commercial traveler, died at Tampa of yellow fever on July 21, 1888. He had previously visited Manatee, where Wall believed he had contracted the illness. Wall, convinced of the nature of the disease, put two acclimated nurses on the Waterman case and excluded everyone else from the house. On July 16, everyone in the immediate vicinity was removed, the area was disinfected, and guards were posted to keep people away from the area. After Waterman's death, the body was hurriedly wrapped in a sheet doused with strong mercuric chloride, a disinfectant, and buried in a metal coffin. Residents in the house where he died were

watched for symptoms, but neither they, nor other known contacts, came down with the disease.<sup>47</sup>

Plant City, a new town of around three hundred persons that had sprung up on the South Florida Railroad, was hard hit by yellow fever in 1887-88. It had been taken there in October 1887 by refugees from Tampa, which lay just twenty-two miles away. Ten cases occurred at a hotel where some refugees were staying. The attending physician called it dengue, and when Porter and Wall visited the city and diagnosed yellow fever, the response was one of outrage. According to Wall, “nothing was done to stamp out or prevent the spread of the disease.” The number of cases therefore increased steadily through December and January, while Tampa’s epidemic waned. Dr. Robert D. Murray of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service visited Plant city in March and confirmed Porter and Wall’s opinion. He then oversaw attempts to clean up the town, but the disease lingered on. On April 24, the county board of health met at Plant City, and, at last, actively tried to get rid of the disease. Over \$1,500 worth of bedding and \$500 worth of disinfectants were used in the thorough cleansing of the town. The number of cases seemed on the decline in March, but by July had assumed “an epidemic form.” The Board of Health then took stringent quarantine action. Plant City, to its displeasure, was totally cut off from the world. A camp was set up for unacclimated persons with the Marine Hospital Service placed in charge of operations. It fed the destitute, cared for the sick and paid the guards who were stationed around the town to prevent anyone from entering or leaving. From October 1887 to August 1888, there were almost two hundred cases in the area, with at least twenty-three deaths.<sup>48</sup>

After Waterman’s death, Wall believed that all possible precautions had been taken to prevent the spread of the disease in Tampa. No further cases occurred in the city until August 6, 1888. However, a “man named McCormick, a saloonkeeper and otherwise disreputable person,” left Tampa on July 27 for Jacksonville. Just as Charlie Turk was held responsible for Tampa’s 1887 epidemic, Richard D. McCormick was blamed for the epidemic that savaged Jacksonville in 1888. Wall believed that McCormick contracted the disease in Plant City, where he had gone in violation of a quarantine. When McCormick became sick, he feared that Wall would deduce that he had breached quarantine lines. “That was the reason why he went to Jacksonville when he was taken sick,” Wall reported.<sup>49</sup>

McCormick’s case was the first authenticated case of yellow fever in Jacksonville in 1888. He was reported sick on July 28.<sup>50</sup> On August 11, an article in the *New York Times* tried to “unravel” McCormick’s tale. It reported that he had “forced his way” into Plant City, was sick on his return to Tampa, and then had taken the sleeper to Jacksonville. He had checked into a hotel, and was later reported as a suspicious case of sickness to the president of the local board of health, Dr. Neall Mitchell. Once McCormick’s illness was diagnosed as yellow fever, “he was promptly sent to the pest house” at Sands Hills. The *Times* declared that “the man appears to have willfully endangered the whole state,” and the panic resulting from the news of McCormick’s illness led to the burning of the Mayflower Hotel where he had first spent the night in Jacksonville.<sup>51</sup>

The city then declared that “all persons arriving here from Tampa, Plant City and Manatee, will be arrested at the depot and sent to Sand Hills.”<sup>52</sup> Even these actions did not curb the disease. As early as August 14, there were twenty-five cases and four deaths. Business was paralyzed, and editors added to the panic, reporting that out-of-work blacks “gather in knots in the streets and it

is feared will soon begin to plunder and pillage hundreds of unoccupied houses in the City.”<sup>53</sup> Though McCormick’s illness was declared to be the lone case by the board of health, by August 12, massive disinfecting efforts were under way, and the streets were covered with lime and bichloride of mercury. Ammunition was fired on the theory that this would knock out and kill, or “concuss,” the microbes; and every night, the air was filled with fumes as barrels of tar were burned. Before this epidemic ran its course, there were over five thousand cases and at least 427 deaths in the city of thirteen thousand.<sup>54</sup>

The *Tampa Journal*’s initial reaction to the news that McCormick had taken yellow fever to Jacksonville was one of incredulity. McCormick resided next door to editor Harvey Cooper, “in which vicinity there has been no sickness of any kind.” Cooper stated categorically that there was not “a single case of the fever in Florida, let alone in Tampa.” There had been a fatal case at Manatee, the editor conceded, but no more signs of the disease after that.<sup>55</sup> By August 10, he reported that news from Jacksonville was “not encouraging,” but he lectured: “People here are too ready to believe mere rumors and reports that get into circulation in the counties and towns and cities, and especially those that may come from other places. Before believing be sure that your information is reliable.”<sup>56</sup>

By August 15, the *New York Times* reported that “there are suspicious cases” in Tampa, three of them in the house where Waterman had died in July.<sup>57</sup> Wall’s report mentioned that cases occurred in the general vicinity after August 6, and that by August 12, it was “epidemic all over the city.” The first few cases were fatal, but those following were “a remarkably mild type,” so much so that some physicians maintained that they were all cases of dengue, not “yellow jack.”<sup>58</sup> Wall conceded that there were some cases of dengue; however, he noted that use of the drug antipyrin to aid fever victims often led to a rosy-colored rash resembling a symptom of dengue.

By August 16, the *New York Times* had discovered that “it is quite probable that the case of McCormick. . . was not the first case in Jacksonville,” for Dr. Guiteras of the Marine Hospital Service believed that some of the cases of a strange disease diagnosed as “society fever” in the spring had actually been cases of yellow fever.<sup>59</sup> The disease spread to other cities in Florida in September. On September 17, Cooper warned his fellow Tampanians that “there are some stubborn facts to face. . . business is prostrated. . . the world is quarantined against us and looks upon our city as a menace to the country. A bug bear though it is, and no doubt exists more in fancy than in reality, yet, for all practical effect, we have the yellow fever.”<sup>60</sup> Cooper believed the cause was insufficient sanitary precautions, and he continued to criticize the conduct of both Wall and the county board of health as a whole. Despite Cooper’s initial reluctance to admit yellow fever’s presence, by September 27, he stated: “We do not question the ability of Dr. Wall and the other physicians to diagnose and treat a case of yellow fever, but we do most emphatically charge that the conduct and action of the County Board of Health this summer has been conspicuous only in its display of vacillation, inaction, and a palpable inability to meet the emergency and intelligently handle the situation.”<sup>61</sup> Wall did not answer these claims directly, but on October 4, the *Journal* reprinted a letter Wall had sent to the *West Hillsborough Times*, in which he stated that “in spite of the inimical press of Tampa which appears to represent a selfish class. . . I shall continue to do my duty as an officer of the Board of Health as heretofore.”<sup>62</sup> This was the end of their fracas. By mid-December, the *Journal* declared that “Tampa is healthy and prosperous.”<sup>63</sup>

The *New York Times* had reported a few days earlier that there were no cases of yellow fever within the limits of Tampa or Gainesville.<sup>64</sup>

Wall estimated that around one thousand cases and one hundred deaths occurred in Tampa and the immediate vicinity in 1887. An additional three hundred cases and very few—perhaps ten—deaths were recorded in 1888. Altogether, Hillsborough and Manatee counties had over 1,700 cases and at least 150 deaths from yellow fever in 1887-88.<sup>65</sup>

These yellow fever epidemics illustrate two responses from communities and individuals not directly involved in the horror of contagion. The first was the instinct for self-preservation, as communities within reach of fever centers often erected barriers manned by armed men to keep refugees away from their towns. In October 1887, the local *Tribune* lamented that “some of the places up the road seem to look at Tampa more in the light of a convict camp than in that of an afflicted sister.”<sup>66</sup> Such “shot-gun quarantine” was imposed by Leesburg and Callahan. Bartow’s actions led to a dispute with the federal government in August 1888 when armed men refused to let a mail train travel through the town because the mail had not been fumigated. These tactics may have worked, however, for Bartow had no cases of yellow fever in 1887 or in 1888.<sup>67</sup>

The other response reflected a humanitarian impulse. Cities and individuals generously donated goods, money and even their time and services to aid the stricken. Despite the actions of community leaders, the “ladies of Bartow” contributed \$30.25 to the Tampa Relief Committee in November 1887, and Jacksonville and Orlando also sent generous amounts.<sup>68</sup> Volunteer groups, such as the Red Cross, were active, and many individuals volunteered to go to stricken cities to nurse the sick. In addition to Dr. Porter’s nurses, seven others arrived from New Orleans in November 1887, and a physician from Orlando also responded to Tampa’s desperate need for doctors in October 1887, when five local physicians were sick. The Orlando physician himself was later stricken with the disease.<sup>69</sup>

One of Dr. Wall’s endearing qualities was that he admitted the shortcomings of his profession. He concluded in 1889 that “the laws governing the origin and spread of yellow fever are no better understood now than they were in the early part of the century, and this is admitted by every man who has had anything practically to do with the disease.”<sup>70</sup> This situation remained unchanged throughout the final years of the century.<sup>71</sup> The disease had to be seen as a national danger before systematic, federally-sponsored research would solve the riddle of “yellow jack” and finally free southern cities of this menace.

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<sup>1</sup> George K. Strode, ed., *Yellow Fever* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951); Henry Rose Carter, *Yellow Fever* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1931).

<sup>2</sup> The disease has been known by many names, including “yellow jack” and “Bronze John.” George Augustin, *History of Yellow Fever* (New Orleans: Searcy and Pfaff, 1909), 71-82.

<sup>3</sup> Other dates, including 1838, 1883 and 1886, have also been mentioned by local Tampa historians Karl Grismer and D.B. McKay, but this historian’s researches have uncovered no official or other kind of contemporary confirmation for those years.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Cochran, “Sketches of Yellow Fever Along the Gulf Coast of Florida,” *Transactions of the Medical Association of Alabama* (1881), 469; James M. Ingram, “John P. Wall: A Man for All Seasons,” *Journal of the Florida Medical Association* 53 (August 1966), 710.



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- <sup>5</sup> Abbie M. Brooks [Silvia Sunshine], *Petals Plucked From Sunny Climes* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing, 1980), 285.
- <sup>6</sup> John P. Wall, "The Yellow Fever in Tampa, Plant City, Manatee, and Palmetto," *U.S. Public Health Services Report of the Federal Security Agency* (1889), 60. (Hereafter referred to as "Wall Report.")
- <sup>7</sup> *Tampa Weekly Journal*, June 9, 1887.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, June 16, 1887.
- <sup>9</sup> Wall Report, 61
- <sup>10</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, September 9, 1887. The local correspondent was Lamont Bailey, Tampa's city clerk.
- <sup>11</sup> Wall Report, 61.
- <sup>12</sup> *Tampa Weekly Journal*, June 10, 1887; Wanton S. Webb, *Webb's Tampa Directory*, 1886, (New York and Jacksonville: Webb's Publishing Co., 1886), 524.
- <sup>13</sup> Wall Report, 61.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 63.
- <sup>15</sup> *Tampa Weekly Journal*, October 13, 1887; *Florida Times-Union*, October 4, 1887.
- <sup>16</sup> Roby H. McFarlan, *Diary, Tampa, Florida, January 1, 1887 to April 121, 1888* (Tallahassee: Historic Records Survey, W.P.A., 1937), 24-25, 40-42. McFarlan was a relatively uneducated woman, whose spelling and punctuation are reproduced here.
- <sup>17</sup> Metcalf diary quoted in *Tampa Tribune*, October 8, 1983.
- <sup>18</sup> *Tampa Weekly Journal*, October 6, 1887.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, October 11, 1887.
- <sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, October 8, 1887.
- <sup>21</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, October 8, 1887, 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Wilson T. Sowder, "Joseph Y. Porter, M.D.: The Merchant's Son Who Became Florida's First State Health Officer," *Journal of the Florida Medical Association*, 54 (August 1967), 801; *Florida Times Union*, October 13, 14, 1887.
- <sup>23</sup> Minutes of the Mayor's Court, City of Tampa, Vol. 2, p. 23, Tampa City Clerk's Office.
- <sup>24</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, October 13, 1887, 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Minutes of the Citizens Relief Committee, Hillsborough County Historic Commission, Tampa.
- <sup>26</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, October 13, 1887.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, October 15, 1887.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, October 21, 25, 29, 1887; *Tampa Journal*, November 17, 1887, mentions that Sparkman managed to contract yellow fever, but recovered.

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- <sup>29</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, October 20, 1887; *Fort Myers Press*, October 20, 1887.
- <sup>30</sup> *Tampa Journal*, October 20, December 22, 1887.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, October 20, 1887.
- <sup>32</sup> J.E. Ingraham, "Sketch of the Life of Mr. Henry B. Plant of Brandford, Conn.," *Sunland Tribune*, Vol. 7 (1981), 29.
- <sup>33</sup> Kittie Lea, *Reminiscences* (Tallahassee: Historic Records Survey W.P.A., 1939), 39.
- <sup>34</sup> McFarlan, *Diary*, 48, 53; *Tampa Journal*, October 27, 1887.
- <sup>35</sup> Citizens Committee minutes, October 24, 1887.
- <sup>36</sup> *Tampa Journal*, November 3, 1887.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1, 1887.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, November 24, 1887; Wall Report, 64-65.
- <sup>39</sup> *Tampa Journal*, December 22, 1887.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, December 29, 1887.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, January 12, 19, 1888.
- <sup>42</sup> Wall Report, 65.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 75, 76.
- <sup>44</sup> *Florida Times- Union*, December 16, 1887.
- <sup>45</sup> Lillie B. McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee* (Bradenton: Manatee County Historical Association, 1961), 271.
- <sup>46</sup> Wall Report, 73.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-6. the *Tampa Journal* reported that Waterman was a "man of weak constitution," and did not mention that he had died of yellow fever at this point.
- <sup>48</sup> Wall Report, 70-73.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67; however, the *Times-Union* reported that "McCormick, wife and son," arrived from Tampa July 30, 1888.
- <sup>50</sup> Charles S. Adams (ed.), *Report of the Auxiliary Sanitary Association of Jacksonville, Fla., Covering the Work of the Association during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1888* (Jacksonville: Times-Union, 1889), 11; Margaret C. Fairlie, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1888 in Jacksonville," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 19 (October 1940), 95.
- <sup>51</sup> *New York Times*, August 11, 1888; Adams Report, 11.
- <sup>52</sup> *Florida Times-Union*, July 30, 1888.
- <sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, August 14, 1888.

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<sup>54</sup> Fairlie, "Jacksonville Epidemic," 96,108; T. Frederick Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Fla., and Vicinity, 1513-1924*. (Gainesville: Florida Historical Society, 1925), 185, broke this figure into 324 white and 103 "colored."

<sup>55</sup> *Tampa tribune*, August 3, 1888.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, August 10, 1888.

<sup>57</sup> *New York Times*, August 15, 1888.

<sup>58</sup> Wall Report, 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, August 16, 1888; Fairlie, "Jacksonville Epidemic," 95.

<sup>60</sup> *Tampa Journal*, August 17, 1888.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, August 23, 1888; September 22, 1888.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, October 4, 1888.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, December 13, 1888.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, December 10, 1888.

<sup>65</sup> Wall Report, 69.

<sup>66</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, October 1887, clipping from the Pizzo Collection.

<sup>67</sup> M.F. Hetherington, *History of Polk County, Fla.* (St. Augustine: The Record Press, 1928), 45.

<sup>68</sup> *Tampa Journal*, November 10, 27, 1887.

<sup>69</sup> *Times-Union*, November 3, 11, 1887.

<sup>70</sup> Wall Report, 74.

<sup>71</sup> After 1888, despite several scares, Tampa's only real encounter with the fever occurred in 1905, with one non-fatal case. It was easily contained, once the patient was located, by using mosquito control techniques.