Public Health Chronicles

THE QUARANTINE WAR: THE BURNING OF THE NEW YORK MARINE HOSPITAL IN 1858

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In 2003, thousands of healthy people were forced into isolation, barred from work and school, and separated from friends and family under the authority of a quarantine—one of humanity's oldest defenses against infectious disease. The reason for this large-scale containment was the epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), an atypical pneumonia that emerged from rural China in February 2003 and within months spread to other cities across the planet. With the anthrax scare of 2001 and the continuing threat of a bioterrorist attack, SARS has been added to the growing list of reasons that a quarantine might be used in this country. Quarantines can be effective tools, but they are blunt tools. The loss of civil liberties to individuals and the widespread fear that quarantines provoke can lead to severe and irreparable damage to communities.

To place the future use of quarantines in context, it is vital that we look to the American experience with quarantines in the past. This article takes such a look backward to the year 1858—when the nation's largest quarantine hospital, located on the shores of Staten Island in New York Harbor, was burned to the ground by a mob of local villagers.

BACKGROUND

On Wednesday, September 1, 1858, New York City was prepared for fireworks. The streets of Manhattan were decked out in colorful signs, placards, and ribbons.[2] The city was geared to celebrate the completion of the Ocean Telegraph—1,950 miles of telegraph wire that crawled along the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean from New York City to London. After an evening torchlight firemen's parade, the day was capped off by fireworks and illuminations so intense that parts of City Hall went up in smoke.[1]

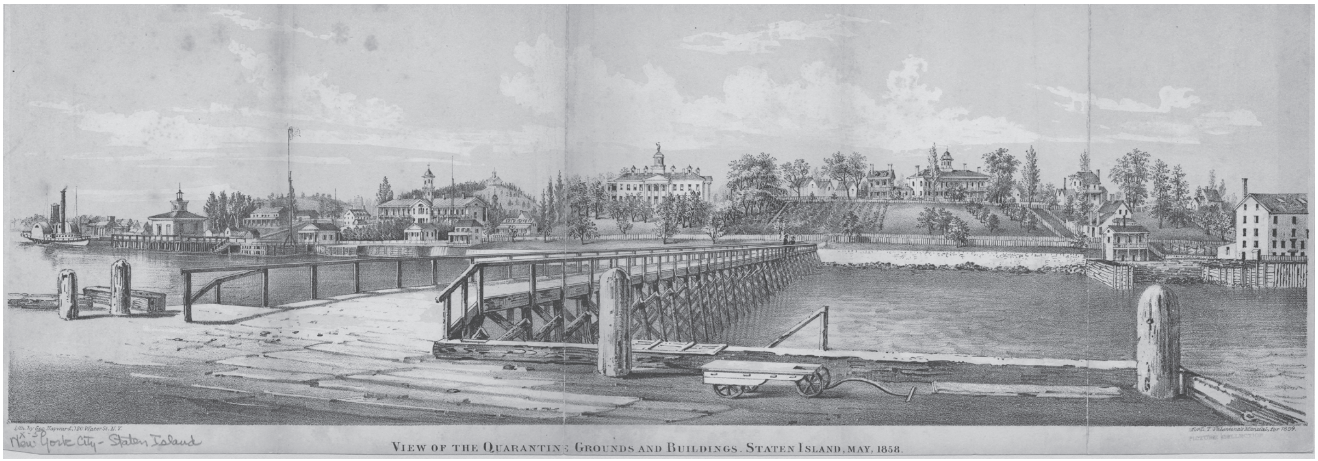
Across the harbor on Staten Island, other fires were raging. On the same September night, dozens of Staten Island residents stormed the grounds of the New York quarantine station carrying matches and bundles of straw. Battering down the high, brick wall that surrounded the grounds, the mob set fire to almost every building within the complex of large stone buildings. The hospitals, barns, doctors' residences, outhouses, and kitchens were burned; even the carriage house, coalhouse, and dissecting room were destroyed. Those buildings that remained at dawn on September 2 were razed the following evening when the crowds returned with matches, buckets of flammable camphene, and straw.

In the eyes of the arsonists, the burning of the quarantine station was a necessary evil to protect the health of the local community. According to one local resident, the "whole Quarantine establishment located as it [was] in the midst of a dense population, [had] become a pest and a nuisance of the most odious character bringing death and desolation to the very doors of the people of [Staten Island]."[3] For the editors of the *New York Times*, on the other hand, the burning "was the most diabolical and savage procedure that has ever been perpetrated in any community professing to be governed by Christian influences."[4]

This article is based largely on primary historical research. To create an accurate depiction of the destruction of the quarantine station, I have relied on the testimonies of witnesses during the trial that followed the burnings (transcripts available at the New York Historical Society) and on newspaper articles from the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily Tribune*, and the *New York Herald* published in the weeks following the fires. For the portrayal of the quarantine station, I have used both the trial testimonies and a sample of annual reports, letters, and other documents available in the Quarantine Collection of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

THE QUARANTINE STATION IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY

Opened in 1799, the New York Marine Hospital—known simply as the Quarantine—was located on a beautiful 30-acre tract of land on the northeastern shore of Staten Island, just a few feet south of where the Staten Island Ferry lands today.[5,6] In the mid-19th century, Staten Island was a very different place from New York City, only five miles across the harbor. In 1855, almost 630,000 people lived in Manhattan and more than 200,000 lived in Brooklyn, but the population of Staten Island—which was as long as Manhattan and three times as wide—was barely over 20,000.[2,7] Staten Island remained in those years a largely bucolic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New York City - Staten Island
VIEW OF THE QUARANTINE GROUNDS AND BUILDINGS. STATEN ISLAND, MAY, 1858.
For D. T. Valentine's Manual, for 1859.

The New York Marine Hospital ("The Quarantine") opened on Staten Island in 1799. By the 1840s, it treated more than 8,000 patients a year.

expanse of farmland, dotted with a few small towns that were concentrated on the island's northeastern coast.[8] Though there were a few industries on the island in the 1840s and 1850s—some dyeing and printing establishments, a brick manufacturer, and a number of breweries—most laborers were engaged in oyster gathering, the island's most prominent business, or farming.[9] Staten Island was also a pleasure spot for rich New Yorkers seeking healthy air and open spaces.[2,10] "The whole island is like a garden and affords very fine scenery," Henry David Thoreau is reported to have said in 1843.[10]

The Quarantine, administered by both New York State and New York City, was located in Tompkinsville, a small village surrounded by the larger town of Castleton. St. Nicholas Hospital was the Quarantine's most prominent and impressive building.[11] Nearly 300 feet long and 50 feet wide, the St. Nicholas was capped by an observatory adorned with a statue of a sailor.[11] The hospital looked out over a large garden that sloped down toward the water, and on each story were piazzas "on which the convalescing patients were wont to sun themselves on pleasant days, and watch the passing vessels."[11]

The Smallpox Hospital, one of the oldest structures on the grounds, had six patient wards.[12] The Female Hospital, sometimes known as the Lower Hospital, was a two-story building fronting the Bay.[11] To the north of the grounds were several buildings owned by the federal government and used by U.S. harbor inspectors, while to the south were several wooden houses where the doctors lived.[13] Some smaller wooden buildings held offices. The boatmen who carried passengers from their ships to the hospitals lived in six brick houses,[14] while eight wooden, one-story shanties housed both patients and many of the stevedores who unloaded cargo from the boats. Other buildings included stables, barns, coalhouses, outhouses, washhouses, and storerooms.[15]

The Quarantine property, bounded on all sides by a six-foot-high brick wall, was surrounded by the village of Tompkinsville.[13] One of the town's busiest establishments—Nautilus Hall, a hotel and pub—was located just across the road from the Quarantine's southern wall, a few steps from the steamboat wharf where the ferry *Nautilus* landed several times a day.

Visitors to the Quarantine did not usually arrive by ferryboat, however. They disembarked from vessels arriving in New York Harbor that were infected with disease, or were banished from New York City for having the symptoms of infectious illnesses.

In the mid-19th century, immigrants were arriving in the city in unprecedented numbers, crowding into tenements located near shipyards and manufacturing plants along the banks of the East River.[16] In the single decade of the 1850s, more than two million immigrants landed in Manhattan.[17] In 1855, more than half of the population of New York City was foreign-born.[7]

Many of these new immigrants arrived sick with one of the diseases common to sea travelers in the 19th century: smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, or typhus (sometimes known as ship fever).[18] Vessels entering New York Harbor were vigorously inspected. All it took was a single passenger or crew member with an infectious disease for an arriving ship to be redirected from the docks of Brooklyn or Manhattan to the piers of the Quarantine. For ships that were unlucky enough to be hit with yellow fever, the "Yellow Jack" flag would be hoisted and the ship would anchor far from the city, in New York's lower bay. Vessels from the West Indies, where yellow fever flourished, were isolated for a minimum of six months.[14]

Whether sick or not, all passengers and crew from infected vessels were grounded at the Quarantine. Passengers from the yellow fever ships were unloaded onto the *Cinderella*, a small boat owned by the Quarantine. All other ships anchored at the Passenger's Block on the Quarantine's longest pier; boatmen carried the sick down from the decks.[14] Sick passengers and crew had their clothes removed to be washed on the spot, carried to washhouses, or burned. The clothes of those with different diseases were strictly separated.

The sick were laid in wagons by the boatmen and pushed up the Quarantine pathways to the appropriate hospitals. The rest of those grounded at the Quarantine, although healthy, were kept in hospital quarters for observation. First-class passengers and crew were put in the St. Nicholas, which was more of a hotel than hospital, and second- and third-class passengers were housed in the shanties. If the healthy passengers and crew members did not develop any symptoms of illness over a specified period of time—the period depending on the disease—they were released. Those who died at the Quarantine were buried in a cemetery two miles from the grounds.[14]

During heavy years of immigration in the 1840s and 1850s, the Quarantine sometimes housed more than 1,500 passengers and sailors at one time, often treating more than 8,000 patients over the course of a year.[14,19] In one typical year, the Quarantine required 108,010 pounds of bread, 1,334 pounds of coffee, and 235 gallons of brandy.[20] Another year, the Quarantine purchased 17 barrels of lime, 1,300 leeches, and 556 coffins.[21] These supplies, in addition to the salaries of the Quarantine staff and other expenses, were paid for through a head tax on the passengers and crews of vessels entering the port. The amount of the tax varied until 1845, when it was fixed at two dollars for each cabin passenger and 50 cents for each traveler in steerage.[16]

Working at the Quarantine

A large staff lived permanently within the walls of the Quarantine. Headed by a Health Officer, who was appointed by the state, the hospital complex relied on two or three in-house physicians appointed by the city.[22] As the most respectable of the Quarantine inhabitants, these doctors lived in two-story frame houses with gardens.[12] Nurses and orderlies assisted in treating patients, washing clothes, cooking meals, and handling patient burials.[14] In addition to this medical staff, six to eight boatmen were responsible for the transport of patients from infected vessels. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the stevedores—the manual laborers responsible for unloading cargo from infected ships to be destroyed or stored. These dockworkers far outnumbered the rest of the staff; in some years there were more than 100 stevedores employed at the Quarantine, hired as a group from a stevedore house on Manhattan's South Street for stints of six weeks to three months.[14]

For the physicians appointed to the Quarantine, the job carried a measure of prestige; an appointment at the Quarantine could be a launching place for a distinguished career. This was the case for Elisha Harris, who was Health Officer and Physician-in-Chief at the Quarantine in the late 1840s. Harris went on to create the New York Metropolitan Board of Health 20 years later in response to an epidemic of cholera.[22] For others, a job at the Quarantine led to less agreeable outcomes. The Health Officer and Physician-in-Chief in the early 1840s, Sidney Doane, died of typhus in 1851.[20,23] Three other doctors at the Quarantine died of typhus the same year. Another physician died of yellow fever in 1856.

Clearly, working at the Quarantine could be dangerous. "Funeral expenses for employees" was a category in the accounting books.[24] In 1856, 33 workers came down with cases of yellow fever, including five nurses, two washerwomen, four orderlies, and the cook.[25] Among those who caught the disease that year were the gatekeeper, along with the assistant gatekeeper and the replacement assistant gatekeeper. The families of staff members were also at risk. After the engineer caught yellow fever in 1856, his wife, 3-year-old child, and 8-month-old infant also came down with the disease.

In the 1850s, the bowels of ships at sea were considered breeding spots for infectious disease, particularly in the case of yellow fever. The prevailing theory among the Quarantine staff at the time was that disease thrived in the humid, dark recesses of the cargo holds of ships coming from tropical regions where particular diseases were prevalent, and that diseases were essentially atmospheric—they existed in the air and could be blown with the wind from one spot to another, as well as cling to objects or people.[14,18,26] One version of this theory held that this pestilential miasma was carried into the holds of ships as their cargoes were packed in tropical climates, while another version held that chemical reactions in the holds—similar to the fermentation of alcohol—generated diseases while ships were at sea.[27] Either way, plumes of noxious vapors were thought to emerge from infected ships "the moment the hatches [were] opened."[14]

Fundamental to this concept of disease was the conviction that patients who were cleaned and stripped of their infected clothing were no longer a danger to anyone else, no matter how sick they remained. Doctors who saw cleaned-up patients in fresh bedding, therefore, had little fear that they would catch yellow fever or cholera, the Quarantine's worst killers. Nurses and orderlies who burned clothing and the boatmen who carried patients off the decks were assumed to be at higher risk of catching disease than the doctors, while the stevedores faced the highest risk of disease. Because they were the ones who entered the holds of infected ships to remove cargo, the stevedores were considered to have the most dangerous job at the Quarantine. Their movements were heavily regulated; if a stevedore should be lucky enough to receive a pass to leave the Quarantine grounds, he was required to remove the clothes he wore at work and clean himself from head to toe.[14]

In fact, though they occupied the lowest rung on the professional ladder, the stevedores were the heart of the Quarantine. They were the most numerous of all the staff on the grounds, and they were responsible for the toughest job, braving the holds of infected ships to remove cargo so boxes and barrels could be burned or stored away until they were considered safe. For these dockworkers—who were most likely immigrants themselves—the job must have been difficult and frightening. Yet, a New York laborer probably would have considered a Quarantine job a good deal. The living quarters at the Quarantine were large compared to those in Manhattan's tenements; though the men shared rooms, the rooms were in houses or small, wooden buildings, surrounded by gardens. There was access to a comfortable village nearby and other work in the harbor for those who sought the extra cash. Most important, wages were good and the job was steady. Due to "the nature of the work, it was necessary that high wages should be paid."[28] The wages were so good that multiple stevedore houses competed for the Quarantine contract.[29]

In 1858, the scale of the Marine Hospital was reduced due to drops in immigration.[24] There were only 70 stevedores on staff, along with approximately 16 boatmen, nurses, and orderlies.[14] In late August, only about 100 patients were being treated.[14,24] The senior staff was relatively new to the grounds: Richard H. Thompson, Health Officer and Physician-in-Chief, had only been appointed three years before, and Daniel H. Bissell, the Marine Hospital Physician and the Superintendent of the Quarantine grounds, was still in his first year.[14] Theodore Walser, the Assistant Physician of the Marine Hospital, was the veteran of the senior staff, having been at the Quarantine for five years.

For New York City residents and officials, the Quarantine on Staten Island provided a measure of protection from invading diseases in a location that was considered convenient to the city. "The present Quarantine, at Staten Island," stated one group of merchants, ship owners, and other businesspeople, "possess[es] peculiar advantages of situation, and furnishes all the facilities required for Quarantine purposes, both as respects the paramount necessities of the public health, and the shipping arriving in our port."[30] In the late 1850s, although there was some debate among medical thinkers as to the appropriateness of the Staten Island site, a powerful consortium of commercial interests lobbied to maintain the Quarantine where it was.

OPPOSITION TO THE QUARANTINE

Commercial interests and city administrators may have agreed that the Quarantine was perfectly situated, but the residents of Staten Island thought very differently. Staten Island locals, especially those from Tompkinsville, considered the Quarantine to be a blight on their beautiful island—a danger to the community, a curb on property values, and an impediment to growth.[31] Resistance began on Staten Island from the moment the Quarantine was moved there in 1799. "Strong opposition was made not only by the owners of the land," wrote the historian Ira K. Morris in 1900, "but by the people of the Island generally, to its location; but it was taken [by New York State], not withstanding, by what in law is termed 'the right of eminent domain.'"[32]

By the late 1850s, the primary complaint of Staten Island residents was that the Quarantine imported diseases into their communities, particularly yellow fever, which inspired intense fear. In 1821 Staten Islanders were outraged by an epidemic of 29 cases of yellow fever on the Island that seemed to follow after a large number of infected vessels were driven ashore in a storm.[14] Smaller outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever occurred over the years, with a particularly severe attack of yellow fever in 1848.[33] "The disease extended along the eastern shore of Staten Island involving the towns of Tompkinsville and Stapleton," reported Dr. John W. Sterling some years later. "The number of sick averred to be of yellow fever without the walls of the hospital was one hundred and fifty, of which number thirty died."[34] In 1856, more than 30 Staten Islanders caught the disease and 11 died from it.[25]

These infections may have originated at the Quarantine; they may have been carried from infected vessels when local residents defied Quarantine rules and rowed out to the anchored ships to trade[14]; or they may have been spread through other routes of transmission. Regardless, the perception among Staten Islanders at the time was that if not for the Quarantine, there would be virtually no disease on the Island at all. Staten Islanders were convinced that illness came to their towns in two ways. One theory was that diseases were blown by the wind from infected vessels anchored offshore.[35] This theory was supported by Dr. Elisha Harris, who surmised that "[i]n a large proportion of the families that were visited by the fever, there was positive evidence that none other than atmospheric agencies communicated the disease to their dwellings. . . . A large tree with dense foliage, or a building intervening between the vessel and a dwelling on shore, was found to afford complete immunity from infection."[18]

Locals were also convinced that infectious diseases were carried into the community by infected Quarantine staff. "Some of the nurses or orderlies reside in the village of Stapleton, and pass my door every day in going to and from their work in the quarantine establishment," stated storeowner John C. Thompson in 1849.[36] Healthy passengers and crew detained at the Quarantine were often seen mingling at the gate with villagers heading to the ferry.[37] "In one instance," recounted John Simonson, a member of an old Staten Island family, "at a concert in the village, one of the attending physicians was present and sat near to an individual, who after the usual time had elapsed for infectious diseases to show themselves was attacked by the small pox."[8,9] Particularly frightening was the way dead bodies were wheeled through the town to the off-site cemetery.[38] One outraged villager wrote in 1858, "The Dead cart regularly came out with yellow fever on the subjects in the twilight and in one instance *Broke down* and the Body *Laid* in the street ¾ of an Hour till an open cart was brought."[38]

Outbreaks of disease on Staten Island shut down whole towns.[8,33,39] Staten Islanders felt that the presence of the Quarantine not only put them at risk of death but also destroyed the economy during outbreaks and stunted property values in general. "I have thought the existence of the quarantine very injurious to the rise and sale of property. . . . The existence of the quarantine has created a prejudice against the whole Island," stated John Simonson, a real estate agent, in 1849.[8] The Quarantine was also seen as an annoyance. Particularly nettlesome to Staten Islanders was the way the staff of the Quarantine seemed to disrupt the order of their pleasant, pious communities. "The nurses of the establishment," claimed John C. Thompson, "both male and female, come out to trade. . . . Both male and female nurses frequently come out to procure spirituous liquors."[36] For John Simonson, even "convalescing patients [were] frequently annoying to the neighborhood from their indecency and filthiness."[8] The cries of the sick suffering in their beds were also very irritating to Simonson.

For most Staten Islanders, the worst of the lot were the stevedores. They were the workers thought to be most heavily exposed to disease, and were widely suspected of stealing cargo at night to be sold secretly in the towns.[14] Also egregious to village residents was the fact that the stevedores were numerous enough to swing local elections. In late August 1858, for instance, 30 or so stevedores received passes from Dr. Richard H. Thompson, the Health Officer, to attend a caucus in Factoryville where delegates to the state legislature were being chosen; the stevedores overbalanced a voting group from Crabtree's Factory, and local residents charged the stevedores with being sent out to specifically represent the Quarantine's interests.[14] The stevedores were also thought to have brought yellow fever to the town by way of this caucus.

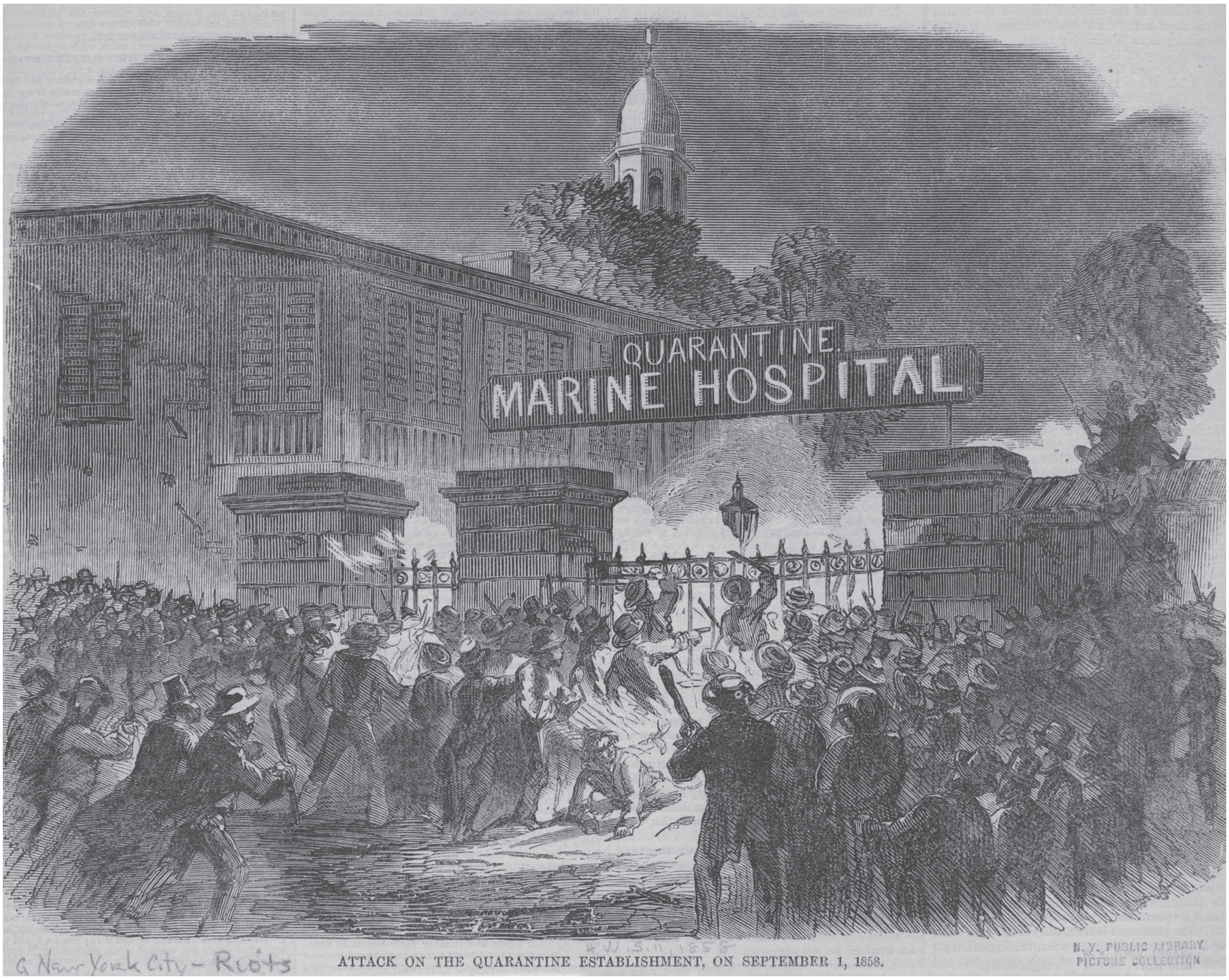
Thus, by the late 1850s, there were a host of reasons for the animosity of Staten Islanders toward the Quarantine. To the residents of Castleton, Stapleton, Tompkinsville, and other Staten Island towns, the Quarantine was an economic brake that held back the growth of the Island and gave the area a bad reputation. It had introduced a rough set of newcomers to the balmy farmlands, drinkers and thieves who kidnapped local elections. Yet there was no question that the primary source of Staten Island's resistance to the Quarantine was the danger locals felt the hospitals posed to their communities. "The dead of 1848 speak to us yet from their graves," warned the *Staaten Islander* in 1856. "Shall we forget them?"[39]

Resistance heats up

Following the outbreak of yellow fever in 1848, Staten Islanders tried to rid themselves of the Quarantine through legislative means. Residents sent a petition to the New York State legislature in 1848 urging that the Quarantine be moved to a new location, and the legislature passed an act in 1849 to transplant the Quarantine from Staten Island to Sandy Hook, New Jersey.[32] The state of New Jersey and shipping interests in New York were not keen on this plan, however, and with no aggressive supporters in the New York legislature, nothing had been done to move the Quarantine by 1856, when yellow fever again broke out on Staten Island. At that time, the Marine Hospital on Staten Island quarantined, among others, 177 patients with yellow fever, 325 with smallpox, 269 with typhus fever, and 8 with cholera.[25] New plans were quickly hatched to remove the Quarantine, this time to a farm on Seguine's Point on the other side of the Island. Those plans were thwarted, however, because the residents of the nearby town of Westfield—in a foreshadowing of the later Quarantine fire—burned down the new hospital structures. When rebuilding commenced in 1857, the half-constructed hospitals were burned down again, and the plans to move the Quarantine to Seguine's Point were shelved.[9]

The New York legislature passed a second act to move the facility in March 1857, but was again slow to implement change. By that time, the tension between the local Staten Islanders and the Quarantine staff had escalated. Complaining that the wall surrounding the Quarantine was too low—allowing the 70-odd stevedores to travel into the surrounding villages at will—the locals successfully agitated for the creation of a Harbor Police Force that would keep watch over meandering employees.[14] Even this measure was not wholly satisfying, and the Castleton Board of Health went so far as to build a high fence around the Quarantine on its own initiative. When the fence was surreptitiously torn down one night, local residents accused Dr. Richard H. Thompson, the Health Officer, of hiring a thug named One-Eyed Daly to do the job—a charge that Dr. Thompson vehemently denied.[14]

By 1858, tension surrounding the Quarantine had reached a boiling point. In August, the Castleton Board of Health passed a series of ordinances encouraging local residents to block Quarantine activities, and the New York Commissioners of Health applied to the state for an injunction to restrain Staten Islanders from



ATTACK ON THE QUARANTINE ESTABLISHMENT, ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1858.

On the night of September 1, 1858, a mob of villagers stormed the grounds of the quarantine station and set fire to almost all of the buildings in the hospital complex.

doing so.[40] Local residents made louder threats to burn the buildings, and the city responded by shutting down the Staten Island Ferry. At this point, the residents of Castleton began making preparations. Around August 15, the contents of a cart were dumped just outside the grounds: bundles of straw fell on the ground along with boxes filled with matches and bottles of camphene, an inflammable liquid.[6] On the night of August 31, a stack of wooden beams was placed next to the western wall of the Quarantine; the beams were fastened with handles so they could be carried or turned into battering rams.

During the afternoon of September 1, the Castleton Board of Health held an outdoor meeting attended by a crowd of local citizens and property holders. The result of the meeting was the adoption of a series of resolutions regarding the Quarantine[3,41]:

> *Resolved.* That the whole Quarantine establishment located as it is in the midst of a dense population, has become a pest and a nuisance of the most odious character bringing death and desolation to the very doors of the people of the towns of Castleton and Southfield.
> *Resolved.* That it is a nuisance too intolerable to be borne by the citizens of these towns any longer.
> *Resolved.* That this Board recommend the citizens of this county to protect themselves by abating this abominable nuisance without delay.

These resolutions were posted throughout the Island and fixed to the outside walls of the Quarantine.[42]

THE ATTACK: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1

At nine o'clock in the evening on September 1, the night watchman on the Quarantine grounds, Michael McCabe, spotted a crowd of men milling around the stoop of St. Nicholas Hospital.[43,44] The men were stuffing straw mattresses from the hospital inside doorways and under stairs and setting the mattresses on fire.[14]

Only minutes before, this group of 30 men had gathered along the outside of the west wall of the Quarantine next to where one of the Castleton Board of Health handbills was posted. They chose "that very spot" to batter through to the inside of the grounds.[42] The crowd set one of the typhus shanties on fire before moving on to the St. Nicholas, which was serving as a boarding house that night for about 65 healthy first-class passengers from quarantined ships.[14,42]

Seeing the crowd setting fire to the hospital, McCabe ran down the hill and "hallooed back to the nurse" to ring the bell and raise the alarm.[43] He then sped toward a group of shanties where about 50 stevedores were sleeping and "routed them up," yelling to the stevedores to follow him and crying "Fire" as loud as he could.[43] Elsewhere on the grounds, Nash, the Quarantine cooper, heard the fire bell and ran to inform Dr. Theodore Walser of the attack. Meeting up with a couple of stevedores along the way who were also heading toward Dr. Walser's house, the cooper spotted the St. Nicholas on fire and determined to help put out the flames.[45,46] Not realizing that the fire had been set, he beseeched the surrounding crowd to grab buckets of water. The men simply shouted at him to quit.

Another employee, John Cready, had started for the barns to liberate the horses. While running along the Quarantine wall, he was fired at three times from the other side of the bricks, where bigger crowds had started to gather.[47] Cready managed to reach the barns and found that the horses were already free. Just that moment, two or three people made a rush at one of the iron gates to the Quarantine. Cready told them to stand back "or they would suffer for it," and the people obeyed. Going to free the hogs, however, Cready was greeted with another shot, at which point he decided to escape to the village.

As Cready ran for cover, McCabe, Nash, and several stevedores were doing their best to put out the fires at the St. Nicholas and the nearby shanties, which were still being attacked by about 15 to 25 men.[42] The healthy lodgers of the St. Nicholas had fled that building, but several patients were stuck inside the shanties that had been set ablaze. A few of the stevedores ran into the burning wooden buildings and got the patients out, laying them on the grass. McCabe ran up the hill where new fires were being set—in the barn, coalhouse, and other small buildings—and tried to help the workmen and stevedores who were trying to quash the flames.[43] There he found a confrontation brewing at the Quarantine wall between Dr. Walser and the Neptune Fire Engine Company No. 6.

Dr. Walser had spotted the Fire Engine Company, headed by Thomas Burns, who owned Nautilus Hall, trying to enter the Quarantine grounds through a hole in the wall. Knowing that Burns was one of the Quarantine's vocal opponents, Dr. Walser refused to let the volunteer firefighters into the grounds.[48,49] Members of the fire company pushed through the walls, however, and the stand-off escalated. Dr. Walser raised his musket to Burns, and McCabe raised his revolver. "I know you, Mr. Burns," Dr. Walser shouted. "We don't want engines in here at all; stand back! Stand back! We will put out the fire."[48]

"I am foreman of No. 6, an organized company," Burns replied, "and have a right to put out fires, and I will come in."[43]

The crowd kept pressing from behind Burns, some with guns of their own. Clearly outnumbered, Dr. Walser and McCabe were forced to relent. "Go and put out the fire," Walser told the crowd, who quickly made another breach in the wall and poured into the grounds.

Dragging the engine behind them, the fire company approached one of the burning shanties and then stopped, doing "nothing more than to look at the fire," McCabe later recalled.[43] Burns claimed that someone had cut their hoses.[48] When Engine Companies No. 4 and 5 followed through the wall, they claimed that their hoses had been cut as well.

The Harbor Police were suspiciously useless during the beginnings of the attack. After spotting the fire around 9:30 p.m., the 15 Harbor Policemen landed their three boats on the Quarantine dock but were forced to retreat from the Quarantine gate because of a large crowd assaulting them with rocks.[50] They could see that a lot of people were inside the walls, "running to and fro with no one to obstruct them, haliooing, shouting, and exulting at the rising flames."[50] Two of the policemen were later put in the Quarantine jail for interfering with the efforts to stop the arsonists.[42]

While Dr. Walser and Dr. Bissell—who by now had joined him—were putting out the fires and trying to hold off the incendiaries, Dr. Richard H. Thompson, the Health Officer, was removing the furniture from his house.[45] Local opinion was not in Dr. Thompson's favor after the One-Eyed Daly incident, and it was clear that his house would be a target for the crowds. Even his life was potentially at stake, or so it was implied by Ray Tompkins, the grandson of Governor Daniel D. Tompkins and one of the leaders of the incendiaries. Tompkins was standing near Dr. Bissell at the St. Nicholas when he heard the cue "Save Dr. Thompson's house!"—the mob's backward code for "Burn it!" He then ran to Dr. Thompson's house to urge him to get off the grounds quickly but found that the doctor and his family had already escaped. "I was glad I did not meet him," Tompkins said the next day, adding menacingly, "and I was *glad a good many other people did not meet* Dr. Thompson."[42]

Tompkins's efforts also saved Dr. Walser from being beaten by the crowd. This allowed Tompkins to strike a deal with the doctor: in exchange for members of the crowd who had been jailed by the Quarantine staff earlier in the evening, Tompkins would make sure the patients would not be burned and would keep one hospital standing to accommodate them.[14] "Unless they kill me, no one will injure the buildings where the sick are," Tompkins reportedly said.[14] Dr. Walser released the prisoners.

Dr. Bissell was also involved in a stand-off with the mob.[14] Confronting a man he recognized, John C. Thompson, who was a well-known property holder in the area, Dr. Bissell told Thompson and the other men to leave. Thompson replied that he and the others wanted to fight the fire and that it was their "duty" to stay. When Dr. Bissell directed the men to help him pull down one of the burning shanties to protect the others from catching fire, the group responded by setting more mattresses on fire and throwing the beds under the porticoes of one the shanties still standing. Another group also started to fill the cistern with dirt and tried to knock it down with a crowbar.[43,44] The crowd shouted, "Kill him, d—n him, kill him," and a man pinned Dr. Bissell with a musket.[42] Dr. Walser appealed to Tompkins, whose presence may have kept the crowd from injuring Dr. Bissell any further.

At this point, there was little anyone could do to stop the Quarantine from burning. Entering through a number of breaches in the wall, the mob had swelled from 30 people to several hundred and had set the Smallpox Hospital, Dr. Thompson's house, and a number of smaller buildings on fire—only Dr. Thompson's wine collection was rescued, to be passed out among the crowd.[43,44] Recognizing defeat, the Quarantine staff focused instead on caring for the 100 or so patients and moving healthy passengers and crew to the Female Hospital, which as Tompkins promised had been left standing. At daylight, only the sickest patients and the Quarantine staff remained under the stars, resting on the scorched grass.[14] The incendiaries had gone home to regroup.

Although the night's destruction produced relatively little personal injury, two people did die during the night. One was a stevedore shot in the back by a fellow employee who took the opportunity to settle an old grudge.[51] The second was a patient with yellow fever—an engineer from the steamer *Philadelphia*—for whom, according to Dr. Bissell, "his time had come."[52]

RETURNING TO FINISH THE JOB: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

City authorities were slow to react to the attack on the Quarantine. The General Superintendent of City Police decided that it was not prudent to send his troops on a costly expedition to a yellow fever–infected area that was not technically within the borders of the city.[53] After a direct request by Dr. Richard H. Thompson, the Mayor offhandedly promised the delivery of 50 men, but by nightfall they had not arrived.[15,54,55] According to the sarcastic *Times*, there was great resistance among the ranks to be assigned the job:

> The Policemen knew pretty well what disposition was intended to be made of them, and a large number manifested great anxiety to avoid being detailed on the unpleasant expedition. A surprisingly large number suddenly revealed the fact that they were suffering from severe bodily ailments. Great difficulty was experienced in getting the required quartette of Sergeants, some having been suddenly taken alarmingly ill, and others have very sick wives and ailing children.[54]

The Commissioners of Emigration were similarly unhelpful. Reviewing a letter from Dr. Bissell describing the destruction of the Marine Hospital by "an infuriated mob" the night before, the Board of Commissioners referred the whole matter to a committee.[56] The federal government sent in 60 Marines to protect a few inspection buildings on the edge of the Quarantine site. The Marines, however, had express orders "from Washington to protect the United States property and nothing else," and the U.S. Inspector was known to be sympathetic to the incendiaries.[57]

While New York authorities were sitting on their hands, Staten Islanders were rallying to complete the Quarantine's destruction. A handbill posted all over town read:

> A Meeting of the Citizens of Richmond County, will be held at Nautilus Hall, Tompkinsville, This Evening, Sept. 2 at 7 1-2 o'clock, For the purpose of making arrangements to celebrate the burning of the Shanties and Hospitals at the Quarantine ground last evening, and to transact such business as may come before the meeting. September 2d, 1858.[58]

More than 200 people attended the meeting.[59–61] Resolutions were passed that essentially reiterated the right of the local citizens to rid their community of a public health hazard and that called for the placement of a new Quarantine at the Battery in New York.[59–61] When night fell, the crowds departed from Nautilus Hall and reappeared on the Quarantine grounds, again carrying camphene, straw, and matches. This time the mob was determined to burn every structure that remained on the grounds—including Dr. Walser's and Dr. Bissell's houses. A *Times* reporter on the scene drew on the ethnic stereotypes of the time in characterizing the crowd: "By far the largest number of those engaged in this outrage were boys and young men not over 18 or 20 years of age. Many were Irish and Dutch; a big pot-bellied, lager-bloated specimen of the latter nationality, with a fireman's cap, was the ring-leader, though evidently under the direction of the grand master of ceremonies, Ray Tompkins."[57]

The Quarantine had prepared for the worst. A reporter from the *New York Daily Tribune* found the boatmen's wives sitting outside their homes in the early evening, guarding piles of their furniture.[60] "They seemed jovial enough," stated the reporter, "and stated that they had been kindly advised beforehand that it was the intention of the citizens to illuminate their dwellings." The crowd did indeed scorch the ladies' homes, and everything else on the grounds. They even set the piers on fire, sending the entire wharf into flames and burning a large bathhouse on the water's edge. No building was spared, down to the coffin house.

Drs. Walser and Bissell had sent all of the healthy passengers and crew to Ward's Island and had removed all of the patients to the grass beside the wall before the mob arrived. As the Female Hospital went up in flames, the frightened patients were stuck between two burning buildings and the wall, and the doctors poured buckets of water on the sick to keep their temperatures down. A reporter from the *Times* was taken aback by the scene:

> The gaunt features and sunken eyes of these poor wretches were perfectly visible in the light of the burning dwelling behind them. Burning cinders fell in showers among them. In full view before them was the noble edifice in which they had been sheltered and nursed, now wrapped in flame from basement to dome. The roar of the flames, the clouds of dense smoke rolling upward, the furious outcries of the mob, crazy with their infernal work, all formed a scene most horrible and impressive.[57]

The body of the engineer who had died during the night of yellow fever remained in the Female Hospital. Jim, the "dead-man" who was in charge of handling patient corpses, "rushed into the Hospital and, seizing the body, carried it on his arm and laid it on a bier in the open air."[57] Some patients were eventually moved to a boat docked offshore, but for the length of the night, the patients, the two doctors, the "dead-man," and the yellow fever corpse were exposed to the night sky and the rain that fell until nearly dawn.

By the morning of September 3, the Quarantine grounds had been scorched clean, and the remaining staff and patients were scrounging a breakfast from the supplies that had been spared by the blaze.[15] Drs. Bissell and Walser continued to attend to the patients now sleeping under makeshift tarps, though neither had slept in two nights and their spare moments were filled scratching out pleading letters for help to their bosses across the harbor. The *Times* reported the following day:

> The appearance of the Quarantine Grounds. . . was desolate in the extreme. The Quarantine wharfs were still on fire; the blackened pillars and walls of the Female Hospital and the adjoining buildings rising out of the ruins that surrounded them, the blue smoke

> rising over them and borne away by the wind from the south-east that prevailed all day, the smouldering heaps of ashes further back where the dwellings of the physicians and the quarters of the laborers formerly stood—the whole scene was in marked contrast to that which was presented there a few days ago.[57]

After more than 50 years of opposition, Staten Islanders had erased the Quarantine from existence.

THE ARSONISTS GO FREE

The *Times* and the *Herald* described the destruction of the Quarantine under front-page headlines such as "The Quarantine War," "The Staten Island Rebellion," and "The Staten Island War."[62–66] The more elitist paper, the *Tribune*, kept its reporting quieter with headlines like "Quarantine Affairs."[67,68] The papers described the fires in detail, sending reporters out to the Island for daily updates and printing a number of letters to the editor.

The *Times* was relentless in its criticism of the Staten Island arsonists. Describing the crowd as a bunch of "mobocrats"—a combination of local townspeople and prominent landowners—the *Times* criticized local residents for being lawless in their actions, selfish in their desire to raise property values, and generally "diabolical," "inhuman," and "savage" for burning hospitals.[4,68–70]

To spite the arsonists and discourage riotous acts, the *Times* argued, the Quarantine should be rebuilt on the same site. The *Herald*, on the other hand, took the side of the Staten Islanders, arguing that the tepid efforts of the legislature to remove the Quarantine necessitated the rebellion.[68,71] "We do not defend mob law," stated the editorial page, "but experience shows that when the constituted authorities attempt to force upon the people a tyrannical and dangerous enactment, even an illegal check on the part of the sufferers will be excused by a large portion of the community."[72] The *Herald*'s editors advocated rebuilding the Quarantine far from New York City and Staten Island, preferably in New Jersey. While the *Times* and *Herald* sparred and exchanged insults,[73,74] the *Tribune*, edited by Horace Greeley, devoted significantly fewer pages to the Quarantine fire and argued that the Staten Islanders were both right and wrong.[68,75] According to the *Tribune*, the Quarantine was indeed a nuisance and ought not be rebuilt on Staten Island, but Ray Tompkins was guilty of putting people in mortal danger and should therefore be hanged.[75]

On September 3, New York City officials finally took action, sending 100 members of the Metropolitan Police. On September 11, the 8th Regiment of the state militia made camp on one of the hills of Tompkinsville, where they stayed until January 4, 1859.[69,76,77] The city even dragged dozens of the arsonists to jail to be prosecuted for breaking Quarantine regulations—a minor offense, but the only charge the city had any jurisdiction to prosecute—but the cases soon petered out.[74] Most of the defendants were immediately bailed out of jail by Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was born on Staten Island.[9,69]

On September 15, the state commenced its trial against Ray Tompkins and John C. Thompson, who had been named as the ringleaders of the fire by Dr. Richard H. Thompson.[14] In the Richmond County (Staten Island) courthouse, witnesses to the fire and the defendants testified to Judge Henry B. Metcalfe for about three weeks; the proceedings concluded on October 7.

Though the trial was ostensibly concerned with the specific involvement of Tompkins and Thompson in the fire, in reality the issue at hand was the community's safety, as Tompkins and Thompson pleaded that they were acting in self-defense. As a result, the bulk of the trial focused on Quarantine procedures, statements by Quarantine employees on how rules were frequently undermined, and expert commentary by leading health officials on the most recent thought concerning disease transmission. The crux of the defense's argument was that Quarantine employees—the mostly immigrant stevedores, laundry women, and other staff—were constantly exposed to poisonous disease miasma during the workday, either in the cargo holds of infected ships or in handling infected clothing, and that these employees subsequently carried the poisons to the surrounding villages. Even worse, the defense claimed, stevedores were breaking into ships quarantined offshore, further exposing themselves to disease in the course of their stealing.

Though the prosecution attempted to convince Judge Metcalfe that the safety of the Quarantine was irrelevant in the face of the violent destruction committed by the defendants, the judge was not swayed by this argument. On November 11, the Judge ruled in the defendants' favor,[78] justifying the attack in terms of an oppressed community rebelling against tyrannical forces.[9] Judge Metcalfe was hardly impartial. In 1849, he had argued to the state legislature that the Quarantine be removed; in his testimony he stated that he owned a home within a mile of the Quarantine grounds and that he had personally nursed his brother-in-law during the throes of a fatal case of yellow fever.[37]

In 1859, the quarantine station was relocated from Staten Island[79] to an isolated floating hospital—a large boat called the *Florence Nightengale*—that was anchored nine miles offshore, in the Atlantic Ocean.[80] Staffing the *Florence Nightengale* were Dr. Elisha Harris, who had been reappointed Health Officer, and Dr. Theodore Walser. (The two doctors were now burdened with an additional duty: periodically flooding the hold of the ship with salt water and then quickly pumping it out again to prevent the emergence of yellow fever.) By 1866, the quarantine station had been moved to two artificial islands in the harbor—Swinburne Island and Hoffman Island—which were specifically created to house the Marine Hospital. In the 1920s, the Marine Hospital was finally moved to Ellis Island.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE QUARANTINE FIRE

The seeds of the myth that the attack was primarily an act of rebellion by Staten Islanders were planted by the arsonists themselves, with their frequent references to the oppressive decrees of the city and state legislatures. The rebellion myth was then amplified by the *New York Herald*, which supported the Staten Islanders on the basis of their fight to free themselves from tyranny, and ultimately legally endorsed by Judge Metcalfe. The language of rebellion was powerful in the mid-19th century and was a common theme of the many riots of the period.[81] According to the historian Adrian Cook, "Riot was endemic in the social process of mid-19th century New York" and the Quarantine War shows many similarities to its more famous antecedents, such as the Astor Place Riots in 1849 and the Police Riots in 1857.[81] As Cook argues, the riots during these years were as much a product of the weaknesses of policing, the political instability of the times, and the corrupt nature of city and state politics as they were a product of ideological battles and fights for freedom. Judge Metcalfe's decision merely solidified the notion—popular at the time—that violence was justified if the state was wielding a heavy hand. In this way, the Quarantine War and the following trial may have contributed to the Draft Riots of 1863.

Unlike many mob actions, however, the Quarantine fires were well organized and targeted. They were led by leading property holders and distinguished citizens. The Tompkins family, for example, owned much of the land to the immediate south of the Quarantine grounds.[82] One key motivation for the attack, therefore, was to remove an obstacle to development and investment. In addition, the arsonists may have been concerned about what new use the city might make of the facility once the Quarantine was relocated. During this period, institutions for the mentally ill, criminals, and the poor were being built across the country,[2,83] and residents of Staten Island may have feared the buildings being put to similar use.

Another explanation for the fire was that the local Staten Islanders wanted to rid their community of unwanted strangers—the immigrant passengers and employees who resided by the hundreds at the Quarantine. The alleged criminal nature of the Quarantine employees was frequently cited by the defense attorney during the Quarantine trial, and it was suggested during the trial that the stevedores had spread yellow fever to community members at the political caucus at which they had swung a vote to their favored candidate.[14] Residents at the Quarantine were clearly considered outsiders. Howard Markel, in his book *Quarantine!*, describes how Eastern European Jewish immigrants were made into scapegoats during the typhus and cholera epidemics of 1892 in New York City and quarantined primarily on the basis of their ethnic background.[84]

Beneath the political, economic, and social factors that might have precipitated the fires at the Quarantine, one motivation that surely existed for Staten Islanders was fear of disease. Terrified of catching infectious illnesses, particularly yellow fever, Staten Islanders seemed bent on self-protection at any cost. As late as the 1920s, the destruction of the Quarantine was defended by Staten Islanders, and even in the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*.[85] It can be easy to forget the dread that untreatable, unexplainable infectious diseases caused in the 19th and early 20th centuries. "As is often the way with pathologies suppressed and illnesses prevented," wrote Richard Horton, the editor of *Lancet,* in 2001, "the threat that yellow fever posed to society is now largely and happily forgotten."[86] Interestingly, scores of townspeople—the arsonists, their wives and children, curious young men from other villages—passed through the grounds of the Quarantine after the fire, exposing themselves and their clothing to the feared miasma. The residents of Tompkinsville did not seem to mind that burning the Quarantine would send clouds of pestilential smoke through the town. This suggests that, although Staten Islanders had not forgotten the loss of loved ones to diseases such as yellow fever, the destruction of the Quarantine was less an irrational act of hysteria than a planned effort to allay community anxieties. The crowds that descended on the Quarantine grounds were not dazed with liquor and terror, but instead were well prepared for the night's activities. There was no plan for the evacuation of the patients, however, and quarantine staff members were shot at and beaten and workers' homes were destroyed. These actions suggest a crowd that was more intolerant and cruel than freedom-loving, and more vengeful than afraid.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

There was no single reason for the burning of the Quarantine. The winning argument of the defense attorneys at the Quarantine trial encapsulates a wide range of possible motivations.

> The fact that the State has taken thirty acres of land, erected pest-houses, and there quartered its political paupers, as stevedores, lighterman, bargemen, apothecary doctors, and other lazzaroni, to prey upon commerce and trifle with the health of the surrounding inhabitants, does not legalize larceny, or take from the citizen the inalienable right to appeal to the higher law of self-defense and overruling necessity, in removing, and if need be, destroying an impending danger.[14]

Ultimately, the Quarantine fire is an egregious example of the use of a public health issue as an excuse for violence. The capacity for quarantines to inspire such violence is a drawback to invoking a quarantine in the future. The destruction of the New York quarantine station in 1858 is only one example. In 1893, a large-scale quarantine in Muncie, Indiana, invoked in response to a smallpox epidemic led to the shooting death of several public officials.[87] Disturbingly, such violence has occurred as recently as April 2003, when thousands of people in the small Chinese market town of Chagugang took to the street and destroyed a neighborhood school where a quarantine hospital was scheduled to be located.[88]

In the U.S., legislation has been enacted in more than 30 states that would give public health personnel, in the event of a "state of public health emergency," the power to quarantine any individual who refuses to undergo medical examination and/or testing if officials *suspect* that the individual may pose "a danger to public health."[89–92] Quarantines have also routinely been incorporated into anti-terrorism exercises.[87,93]

In a 2001 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Barbera et al. outlined the parameters for justified use of quarantine[87]: (*1*) The disease in question can be, and is likely to be, spread person-to-person; (*2*) the disease confers a genuine risk of serious illness or death; (*3*) a group of individuals at risk can be clearly defined and identified; and (*4*) human and material resources are available that are sufficient to sustain the forced confinement of people for an extended period of time. In these circumstances, a quarantine may be appropriate to protect public health.

The history of quarantines makes it clear that when a deadly contagious disease is loose in a community, fear and desperation can easily triumph and lead to violence. "Not only does the infectious disease become the 'enemy,' but, so, too, do the human beings (and their contacts) who have encountered the microbe in question," notes Howard Markel.[84] In an era of bioterrorism threats and emerging epidemics, public health officials should perhaps consider quarantine a last resort, rather than a first response. "Provisions that treat citizens as the enemy, with the use of police for enforcement," the ethicist George Annas warns us, "are much more likely to cost lives than to save them."[89]

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