

City of the Dead: The 1862 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Wilmington, North Carolina

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“I once made a visit to Wilmington and beautiful city as it is now, it then looked like verily a city of the dead... Throughout the whole extent of Market Street to the corner of Front I rode, and to the best of my recollection, I did not see a human being – no signs of stir or life, no smoke from the chimneys, no doors or windows opening to the light of day; no men and women going to work... it was a city of silence and gloom impenetrable.”<sup>1</sup> In the autumn of 1862, this was the fate of the Confederate port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. With the Union capture of New Orleans in April 1862, Wilmington became one of the Confederacy’s most valuable blockade running ports, rivaling Charleston, South Carolina and Mobile, Alabama. Large amounts of goods vital to the Confederacy, including weaponry, food, and clothing, flowed into the city onboard blockade runners. The majority of these goods came from the Bahamas and Bermuda, but, as Eliza Y. Wooton, a resident of Wilmington during the epidemic, later recalled, “Other things besides pretty clothes came to us from Nassau. Suddenly a changed atmosphere seemed to envelop everything and everybody. The usual noise and bustle of the streets outside grew strangely hushed.”<sup>2</sup> The “other thing” of which she spoke of was the dreaded yellow fever. The deadly pestilence raged in the city for more than two months and turned Wilmington into a virtual ghost town.

Introduced into the city by the blockade runner *Kate* on August 6, 1862, the epidemic affected every aspect of daily life in Wilmington. It caused unimaginable strife in the city, and this in turn posed a potentially disastrous situation for the Confederacy. Since the Southern states based their economy on agricultural production rather than industry, they faced a considerable

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<sup>1</sup>“War Time Visit to Wilmington,” *Wilmington Messenger*, March 9, 1906.

<sup>2</sup>Eliza Y. Wooton, “The Yellow Fever Epidemic, Wilmington, 1862,” n.d., Thaddeus Samuel Ferree Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

deficiency in weaponry compared to the industrial Northern states. Therefore, to supply its armies, the Confederate government depended on blockade running to import necessary supplies into the Confederacy. The proximity of Wilmington to the main theater of operation in Virginia made it an invaluable port to the Southern war effort. With Wilmington becoming such a primary blockade running port by the summer of 1862, any interruption in the flow of goods from the city to Confederate troops posed a major supply problem for the Confederate military. The yellow fever epidemic in the autumn of 1862 caused a cessation of supplies from Wilmington to Confederate armies for over a month and posed a threat to their supply base.<sup>3</sup>

During the eighteenth century, this lethal disease plagued both North and South, but, beginning in the nineteenth century, yellow fever retreated below the Mason-Dixon line. Before 1800, there were yellow fever outbreaks in major Northern cities such as Philadelphia and New York. Between 1800 and 1850, outbreaks in the North occurred rarely, and by 1850, they ceased altogether. The Atlantic slave trade exposed many northern port cities to the fever, and its abolition in 1808 was the main reason for the regression of yellow jack in the North. During the antebellum period, the South suffered epidemics of other deadly diseases, such as cholera and typhoid fever, like the Northern and Western states, but the South alone endured repeated outbreaks of yellow fever. Thus, yellow fever stigmatized the South and earned it a reputation as the unhealthiest region in the United States. This stigma caused many Southerners to feel cursed by pestilence, and the mere mention of the fever usually sent entire communities into hysteria.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>“The Steamer Kate,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 3, 1862; Dawson Carr, *Gray Phantoms of the Cape Fear: Running the Civil War Blockade*, (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1998), 127-136.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 45; Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever. The Epidemic That Shaped Our History*, (New York: Berkley Books, 2006), 9-12.

Both the prevalence of yellow fever in the South and the debilitating symptoms of the disease caused widespread panic at its first report. Between 1840 and 1860, there was at least one major epidemic of yellow fever every year in a Southern port city, with New Orleans, Mobile, Charleston, and Savannah suffering most frequently. The approach of summer left most Southerners along the coast paralyzed with fear, wondering if their town would fall prey to the deadly plague. The regularity with which yellow jack struck appalled Southerners, but the horrifying characteristics of the disease absolutely petrified them. It deformed loved ones, turning them into yellow-skinned creatures that gushed black vomit. These horrific sights psychologically tortured family members, and the black vomit was so putrid that it gagged those nearby to such an extent that one could hardly bear to remain in the patient's room. Therefore, when the existence of yellow fever was suggested, it was often cause for hysteria. They did not want to become another victim of the "saffron scourge." Everyone who was able fled the area immediately, and those who could not afford to leave erected barriers, such as quarantine sectors, in an attempt to check the progression of the disease. Normal public interaction, especially commerce and socializing, stopped almost entirely, and even something as simple as handshaking disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

Although Wilmington was a Southern port city, its residents did not live in perpetual fear of yellow fever like the citizens of Deep South coastal cities. Before 1862, the city's last outbreak came in 1821, and many thought that Wilmington's climate was not conducive to the fever. In fact, when the 1862 epidemic began, none of the town's physicians had any experience with

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<sup>5</sup>Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South*, 47; Margaret Humphreys, "No Safe Place: Disease and Panic in American History," *American Literary History* 14 (2002): 849-851; John Pierce and Jim Writer, *Yellow Jack: How Yellow Fever Ravaged America and Walter Reed Discovered its Deadly Secrets*, (Hoboken, N.J.: J. Wiley, 2005), 2-3.

treating yellow fever. Nevertheless, the townspeople were still very much aware of the ravages of the disease. This inexperience with the disease, coupled with the knowledge of the horrors it caused, ensured that when town officials announced the presence of yellow fever in Wilmington, a mass panic would ensue.<sup>6</sup>

During the antebellum period, Wilmington's health record was much better than most Southern port cities, and much of that was because of the effort put into sanitary affairs. The war changed all that, however. With thousands of Confederate soldiers, sailors, and marines stationed around and moving through Wilmington, sanitary precautions became less of a focus. Increased trade with the Bahamas, an island chain that suffered frequent outbreaks of yellow fever, including one during the summer of 1862, increased the risk for Wilmington to contract yellow fever. The summer and fall of 1862 also provided their own spark to the outbreak. Between June and October, rains deluged the Lower Cape Fear. As a result, stagnant pools covered much of the town, and the excess water caused flooding in many of the town's cellars. With so much of the city devoted to helping the war effort, there was little time to worry about properly draining the excess water. This provided a fertile breeding ground for the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the pest that spread yellow fever from person to person, and soon Wilmington teemed with the parasites.

The link that connected Wilmington with the infected port of Nassau was the blockade runner *Kate*. When the ship arrived in Wilmington on August 6, 1862, some of her crewmen were sick with yellow fever. The *Kate* remained in town for almost three weeks, and during that time, native *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes reportedly bit crewmembers. This set into motion a series of events that crippled Wilmington for more than two months. After a mosquito bit an infected

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<sup>6</sup>James Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River: Being Some Account of Historic Events on the Cape Fear River*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1914), 284-287.

person, it took one to three weeks before the mosquito could transmit the disease. Over the next several weeks, the disease quietly picked up steam until, six weeks after the *Kate* entered Wilmington, the town found itself in the clutches of an epidemic.<sup>7</sup>

In mid-September, Wilmington's physicians finally acknowledged the existence of yellow fever in town, and already nervous Wilmingtonians now became panic stricken. Those who were financially able left town immediately. Lemuel Hoyle, a Confederate soldier encamped near Wilmington, described the scene to his mother: "The reported appearance of this deadly contagion...created a tremendous panic in the city. The citizens were leaving by scores and hundreds in every manner of conveyance that could be obtained."<sup>8</sup> The editor of the *Wilmington Journal* implored residents not to let fear get the better of them. "Now, we beg our present and absent citizens...to think about this matter a little," wrote James Fulton. "Use all proper precautions, as wise men, but do not run into panic like children. Do not go unnecessarily into danger, but do not run away foolishly from the mere suspicion of it..."<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Fulton's entreaty went unheeded. A mass exodus began, and grand old Wilmington, North Carolina's largest city with a population of almost 10,000 people, was reduced to only 4,000 inhabitants. All of the city's prominent families, including the Bellamys, McRaes, and Lattimers, left town. Even before the epidemic began in earnest, Wilmington already had the air of an

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<sup>7</sup>"Epidemic of Yellow Fever," n.d., Charles Pattison Bolles Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; Carr, 134-135; Pierce and Writer, 8.

<sup>8</sup>Lemuel J. Hoyle to mother, September 18, 1862, L.J. Hoyle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>9</sup>*Wilmington Journal*, October 1, 1862.

abandoned city. One woman that remained summed it up perfectly: "...there is hardly a person left in the place."<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately for the citizens of Wilmington, the yellow fever virus was not content to cause only mass hysteria. It came to Wilmington to invade people's homes, infest their bodies, and inflict pain, suffering, and heartache. Of the 4,000 remaining residents, at least 1,500 and perhaps as many as 2,000, contracted yellow jack. Of those, between 650 and 800 died, which made the mortality rate approximately 40 percent.<sup>11</sup> Living in Wilmington during the epidemic was a nightmare, and many of the citizens eloquently expressed their plight. Henry M. Drane, superintendent of the *Wilmington and Manchester Railroad*, remained in the city, and he detailed the pain of losing his only remaining relative in town: "It is a terrible thing to die under such circumstances! I myself feel now much depression...should I be taken sick and die, I would die too alone. I have no relation or connection here... You cannot imagine the distress and gloom here."<sup>12</sup>

On October 11, almost four weeks after doctors recognized the existence of yellow fever, the *Wilmington Journal* described the town. "Death and sickness were abroad and no one else. The streets were deserted, save now and then by a hearse or a physician's buggy making its weary

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<sup>10</sup> Henrietta to Mary Foxhall, September 19, 1862, Foxhall Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Ellen Douglas Bellamy, *Back With the Tide: Memoirs of Ellen Douglas Bellamy*, edited by Janet K. Seapker, (Wilmington, N.C.: Bellamy Mansion Museum of History and Design Arts, 2002), 30.

<sup>11</sup> There is no definitive record of how many people contracted and died from yellow fever during the epidemic. The *Wilmington Journal* estimated that 654 people died, but this is certainly a conservative estimate because they based their estimates almost solely on the number of internments at Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington's local graveyard. To further complicate matters, the overseer of Oakdale Cemetery, Charles Quigley, died on October 17, and his assistant contracted yellow fever shortly thereafter, so the records of Oakdale became unreliable. *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* estimated that 800 Wilmingtonians died during the epidemic, which seems a little high. Thus, the death toll was somewhere between 650 and 800.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Drane to Mary Foxhall, October 23, 1862, Foxhall Papers.

rounds.”<sup>13</sup> Eliza Hill, a native Wilmingtonian refuging in Chapel Hill, grieved over the fate of her home. “Everything looks so bright & cheerful today that I can scarcely realize the melancholy truth, that hundreds are down in my native town with yellow fever...[By] last accounts, Wilmington was said to be one vast Hospital.”<sup>14</sup> The horrors of thousands of people fleeing town and hundreds more violently ill were appalling, but it was just the beginning of the misery for the port city.

The pestilence did not discriminate. It was, observed James Fulton, “no respecter of persons, [invading] alike the homes of the poor and of the rich...It spared neither age nor sex. It...turned aside for no profession or calling, no matter how sacred or useful.”<sup>15</sup> According to the *Wilmington Journal*, the most “deeply felt” loss during the epidemic occurred on October 7. James T. Miller, Collector of the Port of Wilmington and Chairman of the New Hanover County court system, was one of the city’s most important figures. Miller’s death presented a problem for the Confederate government. The epidemic had already caused a decrease in the number of supplies that arrived from Wilmington through the blockade, but the death of the chief custom official created an even more chaotic situation. Without the experience of Miller, it became even more difficult to facilitate the transfer of supplies from blockade runner to the Confederate armies that desperately needed them. His death also meant the loss of a valuable law enforcement officer. Under normal circumstances, Miller’s untimely death would have disrupted the city’s judicial system. With so many other jurors sick or absent, his death left Wilmington with virtually no civil authorities. The *Wilmington Journal* described the situation: “The

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<sup>13</sup> *Wilmington Journal*, October 11, 1862.

<sup>14</sup> Eliza Oswald Hill diary, October 25, 1862, Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Hill diary, October 12, 1862.

<sup>15</sup> “The Fever,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 15, 1862.

Scripture says that the heathen who are without the law are a law unto themselves. The remaining people in the town of Wilmington are now like the heathen—they are a law unto themselves...”<sup>16</sup> By mid-October, not a lawyer, court clerk, sheriff, deputy, or jailor remained in town. Anxiety increased among Wilmington’s residents as the city now faced serious security concerns. By the first week of October, citizens reported three instances of store robberies. With no officers to investigate the crimes, however, the criminals went unpunished. Although many of these instances were relatively isolated, it still bothered many of the citizens that in such a dire time, some of their fellow citizens would steal from one another. This crime wave further destabilized the town government and forced it to concentrate on yet another pressing issue, thus keeping local officials from devoting time to finding a way to send supplies to the Confederate government.<sup>17</sup>

The epidemic also created another type of security issue for the port city. As the pestilence raged, at least twenty-two slaves from the Wilmington area escaped, fleeing to the safety of the Union blockaders at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Most of the runaways escaped under the cover of darkness, using small boats to row to freedom. This deprived the area of valuable labor, but more importantly, it provided important intelligence to the Union Navy. The Federals learned of the construction of two ironclad gunboats in town, the number and deployment of Confederate forces in the Lower Cape Fear, and of the scarcity of provisions in Wilmington. Some of the “contrabands,” as Union sailors often called runaway slaves, also enlisted in the United States Navy. Among them was William Benjamin Gould. Gould escaped

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<sup>16</sup> *Wilmington Journal*, October 25, 1862.

<sup>17</sup> “Meanness-Store Breaking,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 4, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 8, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 25, 1862.

from Wilmington in late September 1862, joined the Union Navy, and served with distinction for three years. The blockaders also learned of the presence of the blockade runner *Kate*, which had returned from Nassau and currently docked in quarantine near Wilmington. This actually led to a Union mission to burn the runner. On October 8, twenty-nine Union sailors took three small boats and attempted to reach the *Kate*, but heavy surf prevented them from getting through New Inlet. They attempted another expedition two nights later, but it too was unsuccessful. Although the attempts did not succeed, the fact that the Union attempted to destroy the runner showed just how much the Lower Cape Fear's security had been compromised. The South was already at a tremendous disadvantage in men and materiel, so any security information leaked to the Federals, especially concerning a major seaport which was already experiencing problems shipping their goods to Confederate armies, was potentially detrimental to the Confederate cause.<sup>18</sup>

With such a large proportion of the city either in exile or incapacitated by illness, Wilmington's commercial activities came to an abrupt halt. One week after doctors announced the presence of yellow fever, the city's only telegraph office temporarily closed and relocated to Goldsboro. Since the *Wilmington Journal* was the only newspaper in town at the time and received all of its news via telegraph, the closure of the office severely limited Wilmington's contact with the outside world. On September 27, the Confederate States Armory in Wilmington also shut down for nearly two months. The Armory, owned and operated by Louis Froelich, produced edged weapons and uniform buttons for both North Carolina and the Confederate

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<sup>18</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1927), series I, volume 8: 89, 118, 153-154; William Benjamin Gould, *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor*, edited by William B. Gould IV, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21-24.

armed forces. Since the Confederacy lacked a capacity for the mass production of weapons, a prolonged suspension of any of its arms factories only added to a shortage of much needed war materiel. Next, during the first week in October, the North Carolina Salt Works near Wilmington suspended its operations. Not only an enormous setback to Wilmington, it affected the entire state by driving up the price of this precious commodity. By 1862, the scarcity of salt was so bad that two months *before* yellow fever invaded Wilmington, a Confederate soldier stationed at Camp Davis on Greenville Sound outside the city told his mother to buy salt whenever possible. “It *will* get no cheaper. That is certain.”<sup>19</sup> The closure of the salt works exacerbated the problem and made it almost impossible for most North Carolinians to afford salt. Local shipbuilding also ceased, including construction on the CSS *Raleigh* and the CSS *Neuse*, two ironclads for the defense of the Lower Cape Fear. Most of the workers in the shipyards did not return to work until January, causing a nearly four month delay in the launching of the ships. This caused yet another problem for the Confederacy because Wilmington’s importance to the Southern war effort increased with every month of the war, and the delay in the construction of these two ironclads affected the security of the area, which in turn threatened the Confederacy supply base.<sup>20</sup>

The outbreak also impaired the railroads in Wilmington. During the first week of October, the government suspended the nightly schedule of the *Wilmington and Weldon Railroad*, which curbed supply and mail deliveries. These limitations on the mail service and the closure of the

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<sup>19</sup> Hoyle to mother, June 7, 1862, Hoyle Papers.

<sup>20</sup> *Wilmington Journal*, September 25, 1862; “Confederate States Armory,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 3, 1862; Jonathon Worth to Zebulon Vance, Zebulon Baird Vance Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; “From the Salt Works,” *Fayetteville Observer*, October 6, 1862; O.R.N., series I, volume 8: 89; R. Thomas Campbell, *Storm Over Carolina: The Confederate Navy’s Struggle for Eastern North Carolina*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Cumberland House, 2005), 188-189.

telegraph office virtually alienated Wilmington from the outside world. Thomas Davis Walker, president of the *Wilmington and Manchester Railroad*, wrote to his wife in Raleigh about the demoralizing effects of the irregular mail, but told her to keep using the postal service because, now matter how erratic the mail schedule was, it was the only mode of communication available. Her letters, Walker wrote, were “the only consolation I have in the twenty-four hours.”<sup>21</sup> During the first two weeks in October, most of the workers on the *Wilmington and Weldon Railroad*, including its president, were sick with fever. This prevented crucial supplies from reaching the city. The *Wilmington Journal* pleaded with the railroads to find some way to get provisions to the needy, and the stress mounted on railroad executives. Walker wrote to his wife of the hardships he faced trying to manage his railroad. It was impossible for him to “satisfy the needs of all, under the present circumstances surrounding me.”<sup>22</sup> The problems of the *Wilmington and Weldon Railroad* also affected the amount of supplies sent from Wilmington to Southern armies. Later in the war, Robert E. Lee referred to the *Wilmington and Weldon* as the “lifeline of the Confederacy,” so the stoppage of provisions from this line caused a supply shortage for the Army of North Virginia. Even when workers were able to ship goods, other cities along the line refused to allow them to pass through their cities because they feared doing so would bring yellow jack into their midst. By the end of October, the railroad resumed a more regular schedule and more

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Davis Walker to Mary Walker, October 20, 1862, Davis-Walker Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>22</sup> Walker to Walker, October 20, 1862, Davis-Walker Papers.

supplies made it to the citizens of Wilmington. Even so, the strain it put on the city almost caused starvation to be added to the city's plight.<sup>23</sup>

Blockade running, the business which transformed Wilmington into a major seaport, suffered during the epidemic as well. City officials required blockade runners to quarantine for thirty days before unloading their cargo. The extended quarantine period seemed unnecessary to the blockade runners, but critics of the controversial trade believed the policy was not harsh enough. The enforced quarantine and the yellow fever caused a sharp decrease in blockade running activities for several weeks, and only a few blockade runners brought in essential supplies. Most of the imported goods were destined for Confederate armies, but while the epidemic raged in Wilmington, the supplies went undelivered. The curtailment of the blockade running trade had a major effect on the Confederacy. Since the South's suffered supply deficiencies to begin with, it desperately needed the goods brought in by blockade runners, and an interruption of two months caused a shortage of supplies. Luckily for the South, the epidemic occurred early in the war, while Charleston, South Carolina and Mobile, Alabama were still open to trade with the outside world. Had the epidemic occurred after one or both of the cities fell, it might have caused the Confederacy to collapse earlier.<sup>24</sup>

Suspension of Wilmington's major industries damaged its economy, but citizens could survive the closure of these industries. Virtually all local retail businesses also closed, however, and this

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<sup>23</sup> "Wilmington and Weldon Railroad Co.," *Wilmington Journal*, October 7, 1862; Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston*, edited by Beth Gilbert Crabtree and James W. Patton (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 267, 275; Carr, 136; *Wilmington Journal*, October 9, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 10, 1862; Henry Judson Beeker, "Wilmington During the Civil War," (master's thesis, Duke University, 1941), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War*, (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 191; Richard Everett Wood, "Port Town at War: Wilmington, North Carolina 1860-1865" (Ph. D. diss., Florida State University, 1976), 175-179.

presented a more serious problem. Many shop owners fled at the beginning of the epidemic, and merchants that stayed were often too afraid to open their shops. The closure of local drug stores increased the suffering of those afflicted with yellow fever. While there was no known cure for yellow fever, certain medicines allegedly alleviated some of the symptoms, and any respite from yellow jack, no matter how brief, was a welcome relief. By the end of September, however, all but one drug store in the city had closed. Civil authorities convinced one druggist to keep his store open, but by mid-October, it did not matter. All but two of the town's pharmacists had died, and those two were sick. With so many people sick, it became virtually impossible for the citizens of Wilmington to procure medical supplies. In addition to there being no relief for those suffering from the saffron scourge, people who suffered from other chronic illnesses or became sick with another disease could not obtain medicine either. The unavailability of medicine just added to the suffering and demoralization of the port city's citizens, and sadly, it was not the only supply shortage caused by the pestilence.<sup>25</sup>

The epidemic soon forced public markets to close their doors as well. "It has been one of the aggravations of our present difficulties that our people could hardly obtain any article, even of the most absolute necessity," reported the *Wilmington Journal*. "The stores have been all closed, their proprietors gone – the doors locked. Provisions shut up."<sup>26</sup> Supplies stopped arriving from the countryside, and prices of stocked goods in town skyrocketed. Linked to this problem were the operating difficulties of the local railroads. This problem, combined with the closure of the markets, caused a food shortage crisis in the city. Even the town's wood supply, for cooking and

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<sup>25</sup> "Sanitary Committee," *Wilmington Journal*, September 29, 1862; W.W. Price to wife, October 14, 1862, W.W. Price Papers, Lower Cape Fear Historical Society Archives, Wilmington, N.C.

<sup>26</sup> "The Question of Supplies," *Wilmington Journal*, October 1, 1862.

heating, virtually disappeared. Just when the citizens of Wilmington thought the pestilence had taken them as low as they could go, the menace of starvation soon began to threaten the city. “The Bible tells us that before the end of the World we will have war, pestilence and famine,” observed Eliza Hill. “The first two is upon us and the other is fast approaching.”<sup>27</sup> City officials, however, refused to allow Wilmingtonians to starve to death.<sup>28</sup>

In the face of such abject misery, officials like Mayor John Dawson mounted an inspiring effort to check the advance of both pestilence and famine. At the end of September, they established a Sanitary Committee whose purpose was to combat the pestilence and its effects. The committee believed in the “miasma” theory of the spread of yellow fever, which held that the disease spread through noxious gases. Accordingly, it instructed workers to clean unhealthy areas of town and to burn tar barrels in the city’s streets. Some of the town’s residents had already implemented this practice, which they believed contained the foul smelling gases that they thought caused yellow fever. Since people did not really understand how yellow fever spread, the committee’s attempts to inhibit the spread of the disease were limited. Still, their cleansing efforts improved Wilmington’s general sanitation. The committee’s efforts also helped to avert starvation. On October 1, the committee arranged to have at least one provision store open everyday and advertised where the goods could be obtained. On October 27, the committee opened a public soup kitchen where hundreds of townspeople ate everyday. The efforts of the committee made life in the city as tolerable as possible and probably saved the lives of hundreds of Wilmingtonians. This, in turn, helped prevent a major disaster for the Confederate

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<sup>27</sup> Hill diary, September 28, 1862.

<sup>28</sup> Hoyle to mother, September 23, 1862, Hoyle Papers; Sprunt, 284; “Wilmington Markets,” *Wilmington Journal*, September 24, 1862; “Wood,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 4, 1862.

government, since the rehabilitation of Wilmington was easier because of the efforts of the Sanitary Commission.<sup>29</sup>

Donations of food, money, and other supplies from cities around the South made the Sanitary Committee's job easier. Upon receipt of the donations, the committee allocated them to the people of the city. Fayetteville, ninety miles up the Cape Fear River from Wilmington, was especially interested in the health of its sister city. Fayetteville never severed its ties to Wilmington despite the fact that three people infected with yellow fever died after fleeing to Fayetteville. In early October, Fayetteville officials established a committee to collect donations for yellow fever victims, and by mid-month, it had sent over \$2,000 in aid to its sister city. Fayetteville also sent provisions to the starving citizens of the Lower Cape Fear. Since many refugees from Wilmington fled as far away as Charlotte, two hundred miles from the coast, Charlotte also provided liberal donations to the relief of the port city. Ultimately, Charlotte was one of the greatest sources of aid, raising more than \$2,500 and sending thousands of pounds of supplies, including food, clothing and medicine to Wilmington. Raleigh and Goldsboro also formed committees and sent much needed supplies. All of the donations flowing into Wilmington from around the state allowed the Sanitary Committee to start its work of combating the pestilence and feeding the city's hungry residents.<sup>30</sup>

Cities outside North Carolina also answered the call with much-appreciated contributions. Richmond and Charleston led the way. Like Fayetteville and Charlotte, the citizens of Richmond raised more than \$2,000 for the relief effort and sent as many supplies as they could spare. In

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<sup>29</sup> "Sanitary Committee," *Wilmington Journal*, September 25, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 27, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 28, 1862.

<sup>30</sup> *Fayetteville Observer*, October 6, 1862; *Fayetteville Observer*, October 13, 1862; "Contributions for the Relief of Wilmington," *Fayetteville Observer*, October 16, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 6, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, October 28, 1862.

addition to money and provisions, Charleston also dispatched doctors and nurses that provided invaluable assistance to Wilmington. Since Wilmington's doctors were stretched thin and on the verge of collapse from exhaustion, the relief provided by the Charleston medical staff was a vital contribution that saved countless lives. All totaled, Wilmington received nearly \$15,000 in cash donations and tons of provisions, especially bacon, flour, and potatoes. The contributions of both North Carolina and other Confederate cities helped keep the death toll in Wilmington from skyrocketing. Their contributions allowed the Sanitary Committee to feed a city on the verge of starvation and help ease some of the symptoms of those suffering from yellow fever.<sup>31</sup>

The Confederate government also did what it could to help the citizens of Wilmington. During the final week of September, General P.G.T. Beauregard, commander of the Department of South Carolina and Georgia, sent four army surgeons to the port city. The most important of the surgeons was Dr. W.T. Wragg, later called "the highest living authority on yellow fever." Under the direction of Wragg, Confederate medical officers provided desperately needed medical treatment, and their experience in treating yellow fever proved invaluable. Combined with the medical personnel from Charleston, they formed a large and efficient corps of physicians. By mid-October, the epidemic had spread rampantly in Wilmington and throughout the surrounding area. Thus, to help ease some of the city's burden, the Confederate government let the city use the Seaman's Home Hospital on Dock Street in downtown Wilmington. The hospital, managed by Dr. Wragg, offered good facilities to accommodate "a large number" of patients. This allowed doctors to treat the ill in the hospital, negating house calls within town and in the countryside. The personnel at the hospital provided adequate care in a clean and comfortable environment.

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<sup>31</sup> "Yellow Fever Sufferers in Wilmington," *Richmond Dispatch*, October 13, 1862; "For the Benefit of the Wilmington Sufferers," *Richmond Dispatch*, October 17, 1862; "From Wilmington, N.C.," *Richmond Dispatch*, October 28, 1862; "The Health of Town," *Wilmington Journal*, September 25, 1862.

According to the *Wilmington Journal*, “the majority of the sick in town would be better off at the Hospital than at home.” Like the other efforts of the Confederate government, the creation of the hospital kept Wilmington from plunging into a catastrophic situation that would have taken much longer for the city to recover from. Thus, these types of endeavors helped prevent a prolonged decrease in supplies to Confederate soldiers.<sup>32</sup>

As October gave way to November, colder temperatures finally reached the area and checked the yellow fever virus. By the second week of November, frost had killed mosquitoes that spread the saffron scourge. Although citizens were not aware that mosquitoes were the culprits, they knew that yellow fever retreated after a frost. Thus, citizens began returning to the city, and most businesses and industries reopened by the end of the month. For those who returned, it was a bittersweet moment. They were back home, but it was a home they scarcely recognized. Hundreds were dead, and there was hardly a family that was not clothed in black. But, at least the pestilence was gone; its consequences, however, were not. Although the epidemic ended in November, its effects were felt throughout the remainder of the war.<sup>33</sup>

Since Wilmington’s citizens considered blockade running the cause of the outbreak, it came under heavy criticism. As the summer of 1863 approached, the prevention of another outbreak of yellow jack topped the list of priorities for town officials. In an attempt to prevent an outbreak, they adopted a new, stricter code of regulations for blockade runners entering Wilmington. Restrictions prevented ships coming from ports infected with yellow fever to quarantine for at least two weeks before docking at the town’s wharves. The quarantine period increased a ship’s

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<sup>32</sup>Anderson, E.A. “Yellow Fever as it has Occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina, from 1800 to 1872, being an Examination of the Review of Dr. Thomas, on the Report of Dr. Wragg,” *New York Medical Journal* 16 (1872): 225; “The Hospital,” *Wilmington Journal*, October 21, 1862.

<sup>33</sup>*Wilmington Journal*, November 11, 1862; *Wilmington Journal*, November 15, 1862.

round trip time from approximately two weeks to between four and six weeks. This backlash against blockade running threatened to ruin the business of the industry in the port city. Even though the direct effects of the epidemic ended in November 1862, the Confederate government still felt its residual effects well into 1863. With Union forces threatening Charleston during the summer of 1863, Wilmington's importance increased even more. If the time it took blockade runners to make trips between Wilmington and the Bahamas doubled or even tripled, it would create an even greater supply shortage than the actual epidemic caused in 1862. Therefore, Wilmington and the Confederate government had to compromise and figure out a way to keep supplies flowing into the city.<sup>34</sup>

Through negotiations, the problems that threatened blockade running were eventually solved. The Confederate government did not intervene directly in the situation, because they did not feel that state port regulations were a matter for the national government, but Richmond monitored the situation carefully. Eventually, the sides reached a compromise that allowed ships in quarantine to deliver their cargo upriver on barges, all under the watchful eye of Confederate quarantine officers. This mitigated the anxiety of Wilmingtonians and ensured that supplies would continue to reach Confederate armies and civilians. Ships from uninfected ports, however, did not have to quarantine. Consequently, Bermuda became a much more important operating port for blockade runners for the remainder of the war. Bermuda did not suffer frequent outbreaks of yellow fever like the Bahamas, negating ships from the island having to quarantine in Wilmington. As a trade off, however, the trip from Bermuda to Wilmington usually took a day or two longer. This was much more desirable than the two week quarantine period, but it also

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<sup>34</sup> *Wilmington Journal*, June 2, 1863; Wood, 176-178; Wise, 191.

meant that over a period of several months, the day or two difference added up and less supplies arrived for the Confederacy. While not an overwhelming decrease in provisions, any decrease in supplies to the Confederates was important because they faced such a staggering difference in production capacity compared to the Union. Although this system slightly decreased the influx of supplies, it was better than the alternative of long quarantine periods that would have ruined Wilmington's viability as a major seaport and may have caused the Confederacy to have collapsed sooner.<sup>35</sup>

The epidemic adversely affected the military security of Wilmington as well. Before the outbreak, Brigadier General Gabriel Raines, Superintendent of the Confederate Torpedo Bureau, arrived in Wilmington and began constructing torpedo defense systems. Torpedoes proved successful in protecting other Southern port cities, including Charleston and Mobile. Although those cities eventually fell to Union forces, torpedoes dissuaded Union attacks and acted as both a physical and psychological impediment. The torpedoes hindered Union operations against Charleston to such an extent that Northern newspapers lashed out at the inaction of the Union fleet. "The ghosts of rebel torpedoes have paralyzed the efficiency of the fleet... The torpedo phantom has proved too powerful to overcome."<sup>36</sup> In the summer of 1862, the Confederate government transferred General Raines to Wilmington to integrate his torpedoes into the defenses of the increasingly important seaport. Only weeks after he arrived, however, the epidemic invaded the town, even infecting members of his own staff. After the pestilence ended, Raines left Wilmington under the assumption that his work would be continued, but operations

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<sup>35</sup> Wood, 177-178; Carr, 73; Frank E. Vandiver, ed., *Confederate Blockade Running Through Bermuda: Letters and Cargo Manifests*, (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1970), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Milton F. Perry, *Infernal Machines: The Story of Confederate Submarine and Mine Warfare*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 52.

did not carry on because of a lack of trained laborers. It was not until late 1864, only weeks before the first attack on Fort Fisher, that military authorities in the area once again focused on constructing torpedo systems. Had yellow fever not infected Wilmington, the city would have had better conditions in which to strengthen their torpedo defense systems. Added to Major General W.H.C. Whiting's strong defenses around Wilmington, which had already made Wilmington one of the most heavily fortified cities in the Confederacy, this would have made the capture of Wilmington even more difficult. Wilmington might have still fallen, but it may have taken weeks, or even months, longer to capture it. Therefore, the epidemic, although not the cause of Wilmington's eventual capture, contributed to the weakening of the city's defenses.<sup>37</sup>

The epidemic also left a lasting mark upon the citizens of Wilmington. Although many of the citizens returned to the city after the first frost, several citizens still feared to return. As November wore on, the number of new cases of yellow fever saw a marked decrease, but Anne E.A. Miller, a refugee from Wilmington, heard rumors to the contrary. "Wilmington is still a victim of the fatal yellow fever. It was hoped that the heavy frosts we had early in November would kill the disease but it only wanted food. As soon as the citizens began to return, it began its ravages with renewed energy."<sup>38</sup> In a letter to his son in late November, Jonathon Worth, head of the state salt works, shared similar beliefs. As fall became winter, Wilmingtonians realized the threat of yellow fever was over, but only for the season. The epidemic instilled fear into their hearts, and like most Southern port cities, as the summer of 1863 drew closer, the citizens of

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<sup>37</sup> Perry, 52; U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series I, volume 42: 1219-1220; Rod Gragg, *Confederate Goliath: The Battle of Fort Fisher*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 53-60.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Eliza Ashe Miller to father, November 18, 1862, Anne Eliza Ashe Miller Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

Wilmington grew nervous. Fortunately, yellow jack did not return that summer, but this did not mean that townspeople felt any safer the following summer or the summer after that. Because the last attack of the saffron scourge in Wilmington was in 1821, before 1862, Wilmingtonians were not as apprehensive about yellow fever as cities like New Orleans and Charleston. After 1862, however, the days of Wilmington feeling immune to yellow fever were over, and they learned to fear the fever just as much as the rest of the South.<sup>39</sup>

While smaller than many other yellow fever outbreaks in American history, such as those in Philadelphia in 1793 and New Orleans in 1853, the effect of the epidemic on Wilmington, and the Civil War as a whole, cannot be overlooked. The sickness and death it caused sent Wilmington into widespread panic and crippled the city for almost two months, putting tremendous strain on both the region and the entire Confederacy. At least 650 people perished, including many of the city's most respected citizens, and there was hardly a family in town that did not lose someone. When the epidemic finally abated and people began returning to town, it was a city they scarcely recognized. The ravages Wilmington faced during the epidemic caused severe repercussions for the Lower Cape Fear for the remainder of the war and nearly transformed Wilmington into a literal "city of the dead."

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathon Worth to son, November 22, 1862, Worth Family Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; Walter Gilman Curtis, *Reminiscences of Wilmington and Smithville-Southport, 1848-1900*, (Southport, N.C.: Herald Job Office, 1905), 27.

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