

“You Cannot See Anyone but Negroes:” Huntsville’s Yellow Summer of 1867

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Faculty Introduction

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The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867 transformed Texas’ political, educational, and demographic landscape, but it did not change a pervasive myth—the myth of African American immunity to the disease. Sarah Schmitt highlights the impact of this myth in her article by following the choices available for the white community and the black community during the epidemic. In doing so, she connects Huntsville to the much larger story of how medical discourse throughout nineteenth century America propagated a racial understanding of human biology—an understanding that had little to do with evidence and much to do with social hierarchy.

Abstract

Huntsville, Texas, experienced its first yellow fever epidemic in the summer of 1867. As ten percent of the town perished, many members of the local, white community decided to flee or hide in order to escape contamination. However, due to a myth of hereditary black immunity, the local freedpeople stayed and exposed their susceptible bodies to one of the most dreaded diseases of the time. This essay relies heavily on primary documents, including newspaper articles, letters, and official reports, written during the epidemic and shortly after its conclusion. The documents bring to light the attitudes, fears, and beliefs that underpinned the American South during the era of Reconstruction. This study concludes that the myth of immunity robbed untold numbers of African Americans of the ability to make their own informed choices and of their lives. Furthermore, this essay proposes that the myth survived for centuries—even as various epidemics proved it fallacious—due to the medical community and a widespread desire for convenience.

Margaret Thornton had never imagined that she would find herself returning from a trip abroad to hear that an epidemic had overrun her presumably safe, inland town. But when she arrived in Galveston, the news was clear; her Huntsville home was no longer safe from the ravages of the dreaded disease. The moment was upon her: would she reenter town and discover the fate of her family, or stay safe and leave them to suffer? She had been warned that her journey home would lead only to a graveyard. But what choice did she have except to continue? Her husband and sons were waiting for her—or so she hoped. When she finally arrived at her house, she rejoiced to find her family still living. Yet joy turned to mourning as she soon learned that they were among the lucky few. All of her best friends had died, and some families vanished save a single soul. She realized that this was not the world she knew only a short time ago. This was a world run by yellow fever.¹

Crucially, it was a world that could only operate through the efforts of the poorest members of society, the recently freed slave population. In a letter to her cousins written at the height of the epidemic, Thornton observed

Medical professionals of the time propagated a myth of hereditary black immunity to yellow fever.

that “you cannot see anyone but Negroes.”² The streets of the once-bustling town were barren aside from black individuals since many members of the

white community fled or hid between August and November. Meanwhile, the black community of Huntsville performed the crucial tasks of digging graves, making coffins, and preparing food because Thornton and the rest of her community thought that African Americans were immune to this gruesome disease.

The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867, which killed an estimated ten percent of the population of Huntsville, brought to light an uncomfortable truth.³ The local white community had choices when the fever came to town. They could decide to flee, hide, or stay, based on their circumstances; however, the local black community did not have these options. Additionally, medical professionals of the time propagated a myth of hereditary black immunity to yellow fever, and the freed people were told they had no reason to fear the disease. This myth allowed the white community at least

¹ Margaret Thornton letter to her cousins, 1867, Box 1, Folder 1, Margaret Thornton Letters, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University.

² Thornton letter to her cousins, Margaret Thornton Letters.

³ Jeffery L. Littlejohn and Amy Hyden, “From Civil War to Reconstruction, 1860–1872,” in *Historic Walker County: The Story of Huntsville and Walker County*, ed. Jeffery L. Littlejohn (San Antonio: Historic Publishing Network, 2012), 20.

the choice to abandon the town while the black community maintained it. The consequences of the myth were obvious. Across the region, untold numbers of black individuals perished trusting in their own immunity. Huntsville's yellow summer of 1867 exposed that myth, the motivation for convenience that underpinned it, and the freedpeople's lack of choice. Dishearteningly, the exposure of the myth in Texas did not change people's responses to the disease. African Americans across the country would continue to be assured of their immunity in subsequent outbreaks and continue to die. The story of Huntsville's yellow fever epidemic, then, reveals a crucial chapter in the long story of shaping medical discourse around concepts of racial difference.⁴

Yellow fever is a rarely referenced disease in the United States today, but it was a well-known terror during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ The disease spread from Africa on slave ships, and the New World's first-recorded epidemic occurred in Barbados in 1647.⁶ Many epidemics of yellow fever, or Yellow Jack, followed in various locations. Soon, the fever was a regular summertime occurrence in the American South's coastal towns.⁷ Mosquito vectors carried the disease to its human victims, but this was unknown to most individuals in the nineteenth century, despite the work of Dr. Carlos Finlay who had discovered evidence that mosquitoes were indeed to blame, but he was unable to convince the medical community.⁸ At the time, "physicians cobbled together remnants of the ancient miasma [bad air] theory, modern medical discoveries, and socially acceptable prejudices" to uncover the causes of the fever.⁹ They were wielding a fruitless mixture of scientific method and false assumptions. The symptoms, however, were clear. The disease caused

chills, fever, vomiting, and muscular pain; and in severe cases, jaundice or yellowness of the skin and hemorrhaging from various parts of the body. Partially digested blood from hemorrhaging within the stomach

⁴See Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) for a comprehensive approach to the development of medical knowledge in this regard.

⁵John R. Pierce and Jim Writer, *Yellow Jack: How Yellow Fever Ravaged America and Walter Reed Discovered Its Deadly Secrets* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 2.

⁶Jeanette Keith, *Fever Season: The Story of a Terrifying Epidemic and the People Who Saved a City* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 6-7.

⁷Pierce and Writer, *Yellow Jack*, 61.

⁸"Carlos Finlay: Cuban Physician Who Solved the Mystery of Yellow Fever and Made the Panama Canal Possible," American Comes Alive, accessed July 23, 2018, <https://americacomesalive.com/2014/09/16/carlos-juan-finlay-cuban-physician-solved-mystery-yellow-fever-made-panama-canal-possible/>.

⁹Keith, *Fever Season*, 22.

[produced] the dreaded “black vomit” . . . In the terminal stage, violent delirium, convulsions, or coma . . . [occurred], with death resulting from damage to the liver, kidneys, heart, and blood vessels.¹⁰

According to accounts left by survivors of various epidemics, it was not uncommon for twenty percent of the infected to perish.¹¹ This grim prognosis brought terror. Delirious victims screamed and ran through the streets. One fevered man in a Memphis epidemic killed himself by leaping from a second-story window.¹² In a Philadelphia epidemic, the dead lay in the streets, and a group of individuals found a diseased couple in their bed with their surviving infant nestled between them.¹³ These horrors led the yellow fever to “[unravel] the social fabric of the communities it struck.”¹⁴ Across those areas, all public activities—commerce, churchgoing, socializing, and local government—were completely abandoned until the fever abated.¹⁵ The yellow fever left a stain of devastation on the lives it touched.

In addition to impacting individual communities, yellow fever helped shape the geopolitics of an entire region. Historian J. R. McNeill argues that “yellow fever . . . [helped shape] the history of empires and revolutions in the Greater Caribbean.” The fever helped tip the scales in fights for independence from Spain and Britain that broke out in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A survivor of yellow fever gained a lifetime of immunity, and soldiers sent from Europe to subdue rebelling populations had not been exposed to the disease. These Europeans were more vulnerable than the populations already living in the rebelling areas. Often, yellow fever and its sister disease malaria killed half of the soldiers sent to the New World within the first two months of their arrival.¹⁶ Thus, yellow fever became a powerful ally for groups seeking freedom from European domination.

¹⁰ Jo Ann Carrigan, “Yellow Fever: Scourge of the South,” in *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, eds. Todd L. Savitt and James Harvey Young (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 58.

¹¹ Pierce and Writer, *Yellow Jack*, 44.

¹² Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic that Shaped Our History* (New York: Berkley Books, 2006), 62; Keith, *Fever Season*, 177.

¹³ J. M. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 91.

¹⁴ “Yellow Fever in the United States,” University of Virginia Health System, last modified 2017, accessed November 4, 2017, <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/yellowfever/yellow-fever-north-america-1900/>.

¹⁵ Pierce and Writer, *Yellow Jack*, 2.

¹⁶ J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4 and 305.

Yellow fever could also be a powerful enemy for those seeking freedom from racial oppression. At the beginning of 1867, Charles Griffin became the Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas. He expanded the Bureau's presence in the state, instituted a labor policy to better protect the rights of freedpeople, and began substantial efforts to register freedmen to vote. Such change alarmed many white Southerners because it threatened their monopoly on political power.¹⁷ The 1867 epidemic affected American soldiers of the Freedom's Bureau especially hard, and according to a Surgeon General's Office's report, 393 soldiers died of the fever across Texas that year.¹⁸ Among those who perished was Griffin himself. Historian William L. Richter claims that "without Griffin, the command structure of the Texas bureau collapsed" and never fully recovered.¹⁹

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Ultimately, the decline of the Bureau weakened the position of black Texans further by allowing powerful, white dissenters greater latitude in any attempts they made to reverse Reconstruction's advances in the state.

In many ways Huntsville was on the frontlines of the Freedmen's Bureau's charge to implement the promises of Reconstruction for African Americans. Captain James P. Butler, the Subassistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Huntsville, recorded that the violence and animosity of the Civil War remained prevalent in Huntsville in 1867. He reported, "Every Civil Officer in Town and County is a rampant, notorious rebel and they adhere to the old principals of Democracy and Slavery with a tenacity that would shame Napoleon."²⁰ He also wrote that these "notorious rebels" would not provide justice for the freedpeople of their own volition, leaving Butler and his seven soldiers to attempt to dispense safety and justice for the freedpeople in a community that was violently hostile to their

¹⁷ Barry A. Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 28; Christopher B. Bean, *Too Great a Burden to Bear: The Struggle of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 132 and 147.

¹⁸ US War Department, Surgeon General's Office, *Report on Epidemic Cholera and Yellow Fever in the Army of the United States, during the Year 1867*, circular no. 1 (Washington, June 10, 1868), accessed May 24, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/b21366044>.

¹⁹ William L. Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991), 217 and 293.

²⁰ "Texas, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1870," images, *FamilySearch* (May 22, 2014), Huntsville > Roll 22, Registers of letters received and endorsements, vol 1 (110), Feb-Dec 1867 > image 100 of 101, citing NARA microfilm publication M1912 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org>.

very presence.²¹ Many white Huntsvillians remained loyal to the defunct Confederacy, including Dr. Pleasant Williams Kittrell, a prominent member of the local community.²² Therefore, in 1867, Huntsville was a town with sharp divisions—black and white as well as Confederate diehards and Unionists.

Yellow Fever and White Huntsvillians

Although Huntsville had not experienced an epidemic of yellow fever prior to 1867, the townspeople knew of the devastation that yellow fever could bring to a community. In 1853, the nearby town of Cincinnati, Texas, suffered at the hands of the disease and was reduced to a shell of its former self, never to recover. Many Cincinnatians abandoned their town for the duration of the epidemic, and it is probable that some sought refuge in Huntsville.²³ Somehow, the fever did not infect Huntsville in 1853, and many people came to consider this interior town to be “a city of refuge” from the disease. Thus, Huntsville was not prepared when a man by the name of Mynatt arrived, likely from the infected Galveston, and died of yellow fever on August 9, 1867. George Robinson, founder of *The Huntsville Item*, wrote in 1867, “Alas! in her past impunity, our town relied for present exemption.”²⁴ In Huntsville, between the date of Mynatt’s death and the date of the first frost, the yellow fever took approximately 130 more lives.²⁵ The devastation drove one resident to compare the town to a graveyard.²⁶ Life came to a halt. Martha Ann Otey, the assistant principal at Andrew Female College in town, recorded that “schools suspended, business houses closed, plantations quarantined,

²¹ “Texas, Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1870,” images, *FamilySearch* (May 22, 2014), Huntsville > Roll 22, Registers of letters received and endorsements, vol 1 (110), Feb-Dec 1867 > image 96 of 101, citing NARA microfilm publication M1912 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org>.

²² Langston James Goree V, “Kittrell, Pleasant Williams,” *NCpedia*, January 1, 1988, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/kittrell-pleasant>.

²³ Tim Cummings, “Old Cincinnati was Lively County Spot 60 Years Ago,” *Huntsville Item*, December 30, 1968; John W. Baldwin, “An Early History of Walker County, Texas” (master’s thesis, Sam Houston State Teachers College, 1957), 134.

²⁴ “Huntsville’s Epidemic of 1867,” *Huntsville Item*, February 5, 1898, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University; Verna Baker Banes, “Remembering Yellow Fever Epidemic,” *Huntsville Item*, November 5, 1992.

²⁵ Littlejohn and Hyden, “From Civil War to Reconstruction,” 20; Bean, *Too Great a Burden to Bear*, 146.

²⁶ Thornton letter to her cousins, Margaret Thornton Letters.

churches silent, [and] mails irregular.”²⁷ As the yellow fever epidemic ravaged the town, the white members of the community were faced with options—to stay or to go.

The social ties of Huntsville dissolved, and many white people fled to areas without the disease. According to historian Jeanette Keith, “when people see the sick falling down dead all around them, the normal tendency is to run away.”²⁸ This was certainly the case in Huntsville. The unexpected arrival of the fever promoted an exodus from Huntsville beyond that seen in coastal communities, which had endured prior epidemics.²⁹ Fear is a powerful force, and it influenced white people in Huntsville with enough funds to flee to the countryside. The postmaster, the mayor, the civil authorities, and many families left town.³⁰ There was soon a shortage of nurses since “all who were not sick had fled from the place, leaving those behind them in utter destitution.”³¹ Those left in the deserted town had harsh opinions concerning the true character of those who fled. A Huntsville doctor wrote, “The honorable Mayor left us. Was not his presence and attention much needed here? I, for one, think it was... He is not the Mayor in one sense of the word.”³² People felt forsaken when their neighbors, friends, and family abandoned them to the scourge. A new distinction formed between the white citizens of Huntsville; they were now divided between those who left and those who stayed.

The white individuals who remained in town reacted to the epidemic in different ways. Keith states that people often stayed in yellow-fever-

²⁷ Henri Gerard Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” Spring 1967, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University, 4; Martha Ann Otey to I. G. John, September 30, 1867, quoted in Henri Gerard Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” Spring 1967, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University, 15.

²⁸ Keith, *Fever Season*, 10.

²⁹ “Yellow Fever in Texas Years Ago,” *The Austin Statesman*, October 5, 1903.

³⁰ “Huntsville’s Epidemic of 1867;” “Texas, Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1870,” images, *FamilySearch* (May 22, 2014), Huntsville > Roll 22, Registers of letters received and endorsements, vol. 1 (110), Feb-Dec 1867 > image 94 of 101, citing NARA microfilm publication M1912 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.familysearch.org>; Martha Ann Otey to Robert Alston, September 15, 1867, quoted in Henri Gerard Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” Spring 1967, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University, 7; *Huntsville Item*, September 1867, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University.

³¹ “Texas, Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1870,” image 94 of 101.

³² D. W. Mormand, “The Epidemic at Huntsville,” *Flake’s Daily Bulletin*, September 28, 1867.

infected towns due to a lack of funds, a desire to guard personal and public property, a decision to care for the sick and immobile, as well as a duty to God and humanity.³³ Those who did not flee took two distinct courses of action. The first group acted on their fear of the disease and locked themselves in their homes. They refused to visit with others.³⁴ The Austin College building, which today stands as the oldest building on the campus of Sam Houston State University, became a refuge for young men seeking to avoid the “impartial enemy.”³⁵ According to local legend, Dr. Joshua Allen Thomason was among those who sought the seclusion of his own home when the epidemic began. He feared that he would contract the disease from contaminated mail, and supposedly, he handled letters with tongs before smoking them in an outdoor oven. Thomason was among many who successfully survived 1867’s yellow summer.³⁶

The second group of individuals who stayed in Huntsville did not act on fear. They were the doctors, nurses, and other caregivers who fought to save their infected family and neighbors. According to Robinson, they “did their duty fearlessly, on the ground that ‘it is appointed to all a time to die.’”³⁷ Among these helpers was Dr. Pleasant Williams Kittrell. As mentioned above, he was an influential member of the community and staunch Confederate. He tended to the sick until he succumbed to the disease in September. An article in the town’s newspaper reported, “The death of [Dr. Kittrell] has cast a gloom over our community, for in him we lose one of the best, most loved, and most esteemed of our citizens. . . [His] noble qualities of heart and mind placed him high above the great majority of men.”³⁸ Noble actions were not confined to ex-Confederates. Captain Butler nursed his sick soldiers alone, and despite becoming infected with the fever himself, he took actions to help the diseased town. It appears Butler took charge in some ways, and an article in the local newspaper reported that he appointed a new acting postmaster in the “absence” of the regular postmaster, a “Mr. Josey.”³⁹

The fever had the power to kill and terrorize, but it also had the power to alter the relations between the townspeople. The fever splintered some

³³ Keith, *Fever Season*, 61.

³⁴ Otey to Alston, quoted in Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” 8.

³⁵ Mormand, “The Epidemic at Huntsville.”

³⁶ James D. Patton, e-mail message to author, May 15, 2018.

³⁷ Otey to John, quoted in Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” 15; “Huntsville’s Epidemic of 1867.”

³⁸ Goree, “Kittrell, Pleasant Williams”; “Huntsville’s Epidemic of 1867”; *Huntsville Item*, September 1867.

³⁹ “Texas, Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1870,” image 94 of 101; *Huntsville Item*, September 1867.

groups and ignored the divisions between others. Dissimilar actions and reactions occurred among those in the same profession, such as Drs. Thomason and Kittrell. While Thomason hid for his own safety, Kittrell perished for his fellow Huntsvillians; nonetheless, cooperation between adversaries also occurred. As stated previously, the hostile divisions of the Reconstruction were prevalent in Huntsville during 1867, yet the fever consolidated the actions of Unionists and Confederates, including Butler and Kittrell. These two men and other members of the local community worked together in a fight against the looming enemy of death. For a brief time, political divisions disappeared, and Huntsvillians were simply members of an infected community.

While the truce between Huntsville's Unionists and Confederates was temporary, a sense of community blossomed among many of the white heroes of the epidemic.

Martha Ann Otey and Eliza

Thomas Nolley, two sisters from Mississippi, moved to Huntsville less than a year before the epidemic arrived. Despite still feeling as strangers in the town, they stayed when the disease struck in order to care for the sick. The fever killed Otey along with numerous others, but Nolley stated that their family had made "a host of friends, tried and true" in Huntsville by the time that the disease had run its course.⁴⁰ Shared toils and traumatic experiences created lasting bonds and drove some people to act altruistically. Butler pushed for the widow of the district's supervising voter registrar to receive her husband's salary when he died of the fever. Butler wrote that the man "deserves credit for the fidelity manifested by him in remaining... after the balance of the [registration] board [had] deserted."⁴¹ Many of the white individuals who faced the epidemic together forged bonds of loyalty that death could not break.

What influenced some people in the white community to flee, others to hide, and still others to help? Concerning the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Tennessee (1878), Pastor Sylvanis Landrum wrote that "you cannot tell in advance who will be the hero, who the coward, in a crisis like

⁴⁰ Noordberg, "The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867," 5; Otey to Alston, quoted in Noordberg, "The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867," 9; Eliza Thomas Nolley to Mrs. Montgomery and Mrs. Weston, October 17, 1867, quoted in Henri Gerard Noordberg, "The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867," Spring 1967, vertical file, Yellow Fever Papers, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University, 23.

⁴¹ Bean, *Too Great a Burden to Bear*, 146.

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the epidemic. People who were expected to behave well had been cowardly, and meanwhile, those from whom nothing good was expected had proved to be heroes.”⁴² In Huntsville, people such as the mayor abandoned their duties, but Otey and Nolley rose to the occasion in spite of being newcomers. Strength of character and depth of compassion were the defining points in these cases.⁴³ Cowardice and courage can both appear where they are least expected. It seems unlikely that the white townspeople would have predicted that their mayor and civil authorities would abandon them in such a time as the epidemic; however, the inner depth of an individual’s character is difficult to discern in normal circumstances. Otey proclaimed, “Distress was everywhere... We [Nolley and Otey] have been going around wherever needed. Our courage has given courage to others.”⁴⁴ These outsiders set an example that inspired many people in the town to care for one another. As some stayed while others fled or hid, Huntsville’s white citizens learned that events such as the epidemic often show the “uncomfortable truths about goodness.”⁴⁵

Yellow Fever and Black Huntsvillians

The freedpeople, a majority of Huntsville’s population, did not have the choice to flee or hide. They stayed because they were told not to fear the disease. Most medical experts believed that the bodies of the black population were strong enough to render them less likely to catch the disease or outright incapable of becoming infected.⁴⁶ According to a doctor at a military hospital in Louisiana, “Color has... much to do with susceptibility for the disease, the pure African being much less liable than the mulatto.”⁴⁷ Therefore, with most physicians believing in this immunity, white and black people in many areas around the country also accepted this myth as a biological certainty.⁴⁸ Huntsville’s own Margaret Thornton stated, “They [Negroes] do not take the plague like white folks.”⁴⁹ Her words represented the thoughts of many in 1867.

Nonetheless, this myth was wrong. In fact, various epidemics had proven the myth incorrect many times. Philadelphia’s 1793 epidemic provides the best, most famous example. When the yellow fever struck the nation’s then

⁴² Keith, *Fever Season*, 181.

⁴³ Keith, *Fever Season*, 210.

⁴⁴ Otey to Alston, quoted in Noordberg, “The Huntsville, Texas Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” 8.

⁴⁵ Keith, *Fever Season*, 184.

⁴⁶ Pierce and Writer, *Yellow Jack*, 38; Keith, *Fever Season*, 6 and 220n5.

⁴⁷ US War Department, Surgeon General’s Office, *Report on Epidemic Cholera and Yellow Fever*, 134.

⁴⁸ Keith, *Fever Season*, 61.

⁴⁹ Thornton letter to her cousins, Margaret Thornton Letters.

capital, people responded much as they would in Huntsville seventy-four years later. Specifically, some fled from their sick loved ones, and as a whole, they believed in black immunity.⁵⁰ The newspapers pleaded with the black community “that since God had granted them special exemption from the disease, they had a particular obligation to come forward and attend the sick of all ranks.” Many responded bravely, and black individuals served as nurses and helped transport the dead.⁵¹ Within a few weeks, however, the city realized the truth as those of African descent were infected with the fever as frequently as those they were trying to save.⁵² This proved to be a tragic experience where slaves and free black individuals extended generosity and kindness to those who had none for them and received death in exchange. In 1867, the lesson provided by Philadelphia was nowhere to be found.

Huntsville kept no official record of deaths in 1867, but a partial list of the yellow fever’s victims shows that out of 114 who perished, there were ten reported black individuals who lost their lives to the disease.⁵³ Since black people were underreported in life and often ignored in death, it is likely that the true number of freedpeople who perished from the fever was significantly higher than this account claims. The majority of the recently freed slaves were illiterate, and the dearth of sources written by freedpeople from this time makes piecing together an accurate count of the dead regrettably improbable. The deaths of those who thought they were safe taught and retaught the lesson of the myth’s fallacy multiple times. Yet, people seemed to forget that hereditary immunity was a myth during each new fever season.

Where did the myth come from? It is likely that the myth was born out of misunderstood facts. If caught in childhood, the disease is mild and leaves its victim with a lifetime of immunity. Both the slaves and the disease originated from Africa, and it is probable that many slaves had acquired immunity in this type of adolescent infection. The fever would have infected white people in the first epidemics outside of Africa, but it would have passed over the slaves. This made it easy for medical professionals and laymen alike to confuse acquired immunity for natural immunity.⁵⁴

The yellow fever may not have terrorized the freedpeople, but they had

⁵⁰ Francis R. Packard, “Benjamin Rush, 1745-1813,” in *Yellow Fever in Galveston, Republic of Texas, 1839: An Account of the Great Epidemic*, ed. Chauncey D. Leake (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), 93.

⁵¹ Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 95 and 98.

⁵² Packard, “Benjamin Rush, 1745-1813,” 93.

⁵³ “Huntsville’s Epidemic of 1867.”

⁵⁴ Pierce and Writer, *Yellow Jack*, 38.

plenty of other worries. Walker County saw a ten percent increase in its black population from 1860 to 1870. Meanwhile, Huntsville itself experienced a fifteen percent increase between the end of the Civil War and 1870. This growth in the local black community and efforts to register freedmen to vote, as mentioned above, alarmed white Southerners.⁵⁵ Captain Butler worked tirelessly to protect the local freedpeople in this hostile environment, but the yellow fever seriously undermined his efforts when it killed five of the seven American soldiers under his command.⁵⁶ In his records, Butler stated that a white man murdered a freedman without provocation in Walker County in 1867.⁵⁷ In fact, racial violence would provoke the governor of Texas to take the drastic step of declaring martial law in Walker County in 1871.⁵⁸ Terror took on different forms for the black and white communities.

Here lie two ironies. First, many white Southerners—the “notorious rebels”—despised the promise of Reconstruction, but they were willing to flee and hide while the freedpeople performed necessary tasks and cared for the town during the epidemic. Many white individuals had been distressed at the notion of black voters threatening their power monopoly only months before the epidemic’s outbreak. Yet, when challenged by the yellow fever, they willingly provided circumstances that made freedpeople’s greater involvement in town life inescapable, if only for the short term. Second, some white individuals claimed that black people were inferior, yet they also believed that the latter group was immune to one of the most devastating diseases of the century; furthermore, medical practice was responsible for the longevity of the myths of black inferiority and of black immunity.

Conclusion

Today, the remembered heroes of the Huntsville epidemic are white. People rightly herald the bravery of the white members of the community who fought the disease; however, the black members of the community who did the same are infrequently mentioned outside of a brief description of the myth of immunity,⁵⁹ which occurred due to a further, shameful

⁵⁵ Ricky F. Dobbs, “Defying Davis: The Walker Country Rebellion, 1871,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 31, no. 2 (October 1993): 36–7, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/article=2126&context=ethj>; Bean, *Too Great a Burden to Bear*, 147.

⁵⁶ *Huntsville Item*, September 1867.

⁵⁷ “Texas, Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records, 1865–1870,” image 96 of 101.

⁵⁸ Littlejohn and Hyden, “From Civil War to Reconstruction,” 20.

⁵⁹ Texas Historical Commission, “The Huntsville Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1867,” 2016, historical marker, Oakwood Cemetery, Huntsville, Texas.

proclivity for convenience. As stated above, the local black community did not leave records comparable to those left by the white community during the time of the epidemic. It is easy to ignore the efforts of those who do not tell of their own deeds; moreover, visible markers in Oakwood Cemetery denote the graves of the white individuals who succumbed to the disease, and the Texas Historical Commission has honored many of the prominent white members of the community by placing historical markers adjacent to their headstones. The resting place of the freedpeople who perished is not known exactly, but it is believed that they were buried in mainly unmarked graves in an area of the cemetery that a supervised team of prison inmates rediscovered in recent years.⁶⁰ Historians and members of the local community alike must make efforts to recall from the past the noble deeds of the freedpeople before any possibility of such is gone.

Huntsville's yellow fever epidemic exposed the myth of black immunity. Freedpeople did not have the chance to choose their responses to the epidemic due to the myth, and their deaths proved yet again that those of African descent were susceptible to the yellow fever. Following 1867, this lesson was forgotten, which is evidenced by the one thousand freedpeople who died believing that they would not get sick in Memphis's 1878 epidemic. Keith asserts that "societies choose what they want to remember about the past."⁶¹ Society had the opportunity to learn from 1867 and overturn a deadly myth. Nevertheless, after 1867's yellow summer, society forgot what it had learned. They rejected the truth for a lie. Times of devastation can be enlightening, but the uncomfortable truths about racial myth and convenience revealed to Huntsville in 1867 were ignored. ■

⁶⁰ "Honoring Unknown Graves," historical marker, Oakwood Cemetery, Huntsville, Texas.

⁶¹ Keith, *Fever Season*, 214 and 220n5.

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Student Biography

Sarah Schmitt graduated summa cum laude in history with a minor in communication studies from SHSU in August of 2018. During her time as an undergraduate, Sarah conducted historical research on topics of globalization, memory, culture, race, war, and genocide. Her particular interests in war and genocide were planted through numerous courses taught by Dr. Zachary Doleshal, and she began to ponder questions of culpability and victimhood in connection to mass atrocities. Going forward, Sarah plans to undertake a detailed analysis of the Holocaust of European Jewry for her thesis as part of the Master's program at SHSU. She also has the honor of serving as a Graduate Assistant for the Department of History and as the Vice-President for the Sigma-Phi chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (National History Honor Society). Ultimately, Sarah aspires to become a professor who sparks a lifelong passion for history in her students.

