Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1888

By Joanna Grey Talbot

As with many diseases in the 1800s, doctors did not know what caused them or how they spread. One such disease was yellow fever. It is called that because the skin and eyes of those who are infected turn a yellow hue. At the time, before a vaccine was created, those who suffered from it could die within a couple days or recover within a week. It was a very scary disease and all kinds of different measures were taken to hinder the spread of it but unfortunately, were not always successful.

In 1888 a yellow fever epidemic struck Florida with full force. It reached its height over the summer because as we know now it is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. One of many towns that dealt with it was Gainesville. It began to rear its ugly head there in September as a result of infected guardsmen returning from Fernandina. They had been sent there to help the city officials control a labor strike at the docks without knowing that Fernandina already had confirmed cases of the disease.

At the time it was popular belief that yellow fever was caused by poor sanitation and hygiene so many people fled the city before a quarantine was put in place. Within a couple days of the yellow fever cases being announced nearly two-thirds of Gainesville's population had left and wouldn't return until the epidemic had passed. The city officials and county health officer instituted a quarantine and placed guards at all rail and road entrances to the county.

"Yellow Fever Scourge in Florida - Scene at a Railway Station - Turning Back Refugees," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 8, 1888. *Image courtesy of the State Library and Archives of Florida.*

By the time the city's epidemic had ended in December, there had been 116 confirmed cases and 16 deaths, although the actual total may never be known. In 1890 a memorial was erected by the Gainesville Guard to remember their brothers-in-arms and other citizens who had died as a result of the disease. It was placed on the courthouse

square in downtown but subsequently moved to Evergreen Cemetery in 1922 where it still stands today.

The yellow fever monument is the white obelisk located behind the women. This was its initial location on the courthouse square before it was moved to Evergreen Cemetery. *Postcard courtesy of the Matheson History Museum collection.*

Although this statewide epidemic was horrific, the positive result of it was that in 1889 the state finally formed a State Board of Health to help coordinate efforts for future epidemics, along with helping to improve public health. Dr. Joseph Y. Porter, a Key West physician who had coordinated Jacksonville's efforts during the yellow fever scourge, was named the first State Health Officer. Up until the creation of the state board, each county had its own board that reported directly to the governor. This made for very inefficient communication and varying degrees of quarantine during epidemics.

To learn more about the yellow fever epidemic and other medical milestones in Florida's history be sure to visit the Matheson History Museum's new exhibition, *Medical Milestones: Transitions in Health and Wellness in Alachua County, Florida*. It runs from September 13th to December 23rd. Don't miss it!

Sources: Laurie, Murray. "Yellow Peril of 1888," *Gainesville Sun,* October 24, 2009. http://www.gainesville.com/news/20091024/yellow-peril-of-1888

Florida Memory, State Library & Archives of Florida. "Epidemic Disease and the Establishment of the Board of Health." https://www.floridamemory.com/exhibits/medicine/disease/