

Docents and *Yellow Fever!*

. . . Rationale, Material Culture and Documentation

On Friday and Saturday evenings in October the Davenport House will present a program called ***Dreadful Pestilence*** interpreting the 1820 Savannah yellow fever epidemic. Though it is not the sweetest of topics, understanding it falls within the realm of the museum's mission to "*present the lifestyle of a successful craftsman in Savannah from 1820-1827.*" While to the modern-thinking, sickness is considered abnormal -- the ill are taken away from their homes for treatment, to convalesce and sometimes to die. In the early 19th century disease was a constant. People lived with it in their homes and it was a part of everyone's daily life, including the Davenports. Remembering what our forbearers endured can be beneficial.

Also, many people visit Savannah to get "grossed out" or "scared silly" on ghost tours, which are less than loosely based on credible documented sources. The museum's thought is to give visitors an evening experience in the house learning about something that really happened, which seems even more frightful than restless spirits walking on widow's walks or little girls in blue dresses looking out the window. The program has been successful for the past two years — sell-

ing out most performances and, just as significant, giving people a show they will remember. One visitor wrote, when asked what she liked best, "*The feeling of being drawn completely into the event, as if we were witnesses to actual events in the 1820s. The events were 'real' enough to raise goose flesh!*" The 2003 production received the Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries award for **Museum Education Program of the Year**, which is rare, particularly since most museum education programs focus on school-age children. Whether the DH can duplicate the success of previous years, we will have to wait and see.

Successful or not attendance-wise, offering understanding of the disease and its ramifications is an opportunity for the Davenport House to explain a seldom discussed facet of 19th century daily life. We anticipate that daytime docents will continue with their normal presentation, but hopefully add a few hints of what visitors might see if they choose to take the ***Dreadful Pestilence*** experience. From the beginning we planned this living history experience so as not to copy or restate the normal daily tour. That is its selling point. "*You can take the tour during the day and then come back for the evening program and not hear any of*

the same information," says program developer Raleigh Marcell.

A museum's job is to interpret **material culture** – the objects from the past – and place them in context. There are a number of objects which can help tell the yellow fever story. The below is a run-down of a few.

Lancet – a surgeon's knife used to bleed patients

Bleeding cup - a small glass cup placed on the skin to create a vacuum in drawing blood

Pocket watch – a time piece used to check the pulse; once the pulse slowed to a certain point the bleeding of a patient would cease

Ribbing band – a piece of cloth tied around an extremity to facilitate bleeding

Chamber pot – patients would be bled into a chamber pot; also a doctor examined human waste to determine the patient's condition and/or course of an illness

Blanket – patients were wrapped in blankets to "sweat" as a treatment

Mosquito netting – early 19th century people did not know that mosquitoes caused yellow fever; but they did know that protecting themselves from being bitten was a more agreeable way to sleep

Cistern – water catching & storage device; the particular variety of mosquito that causes yellow fever breeds in standing fresh water

The sick bed – visitors and attendants held vigil around the bed of an ill person during times of crisis

Emetic – a medicine that induced vomiting

Medicine bottle – emetics such as calomel could be purchased from a druggist in a bottle

Closed shutters – fresh air was not seen as beneficial to a sick person; window shutters were often closed to prevent “bad air” from entering

Leeches – parasitic animals which suck blood; physicians used leeches to bleed patients

Leech jar – physicians kept leeches in a special jar

Mourning items – Once a person died there was an elaborate set of customs and adjustments made to daily life out of reverence to the deceased and his or her family. While not as involved as the customs of the Victorians later in the century, some customs included placing crepe ribbon on the door knocker to keep the noise from callers to a minimum. Shiny household bric-a-brac was put away. Crepe would also be placed around pictures, particularly those of the deceased, etc.

The following are phrases, quotes, ideas and concepts

which may help place yellow fever in its context.

January 11, 1820 – the date of the devastating fire in Savannah which destroyed much of the business district

Columbia Museum and Savannah Gazette; Daily Georgian - Savannah newspapers in 1820

Sickly season – the common term for the time of year, May to October, when sickness prevailed in the city

In 1820 Savannah had a wet summer and spring.

importance of preserving their yards and offices in a state of cleanliness – quote indicating the belief that filth was a cause of disease and sickness

pestilential disease – quote on the type of devastating sickness occurring in the city

Secrets from the populace – August 15, 1820 - The newspaper editor reported his belief that officials were keeping information about the extent of sickness from the general population.

Board of Health, Health Committees and Medical Societies – the organizations the community looked to for understanding about the sickness

no pestilence prevails in this city – quote from Mayor Thos. U. P. Charlton on August 15, 1820 about the extent of the sickness in the city

Strangers – it was a belief that “foreigners” or short term residents were the most affected by the illness and may also have been the source.

People of intemperate, dissolute habits – quote about the early victims of the disease; the practice of blaming victims for their illness

owing to the poverty of many of the inhabitants living in too crowded environments with few conveniences, and considerable filth and dirt in the yards, encreased [sic] by the late rain

C. HARRIS

M. HERBERT health Com.

M. MYERS, c.c. (DG)

Washington Ward, bordering on the river – The area earliest affected by the disease.

Contagious – There was a belief that the disease was “catching” though we now know that it is mosquito borne.

fumigating, white washing, &c, of Washington ward – quote about the preventative actions taken to stop the spread of the disease

a day of fasting, and of prayer to Almighty God, that he would be pleased to stay the hand of death, and spare the lives of the inhabitants of this city. August 29, 1820

Black vomit – common term for the disease. The symptomatic regurgitation of blood and stomach juices which resembled coffee grounds.

Remittent fever, intermittent fever, dangerous fever, yellow fever – other names given to the disease

CITY OF SAVANNAH

Police Office, Sept. 14, 1820

'I feel it my duty to announce to my fellow citizens, and to all whom it may concern, that a mortality prevails in this city, never before experienced; and that the character and type of a malignancy, which renders it prudent for any person, who can make it convenient, to remove beyond the limits of the city's atmosphere.

I feel myself also authorized to say, that the fever which is carrying off our people, is not contagious, and that no apprehension ought to be entertained of its being communicated by persons leaving the city.'

T.U.P. CHARLTON, Mayor (CM)

Pride of India – common name given to the crepe myrtle tree; someone from South Carolina wrote to the newspaper that the Pride of India tree was the cause of the disease.

But the 14th of October has come, and on every side of us we still behold the dreadful march of the pestilence – we still hear the groans of the dying, the despairing shrieks of the living; and our eyes are yet pained with the sight of the moving hearse – the solemn yet slow and lonely tread of woe.

A great mortality also prevails among the blacks;

but as they are not noticed in the official reports, we have no data on which to found an estimate of their number.

Mr. BRASH'S Bake-House – merchant gave bread away to the afflicted

GAUDRY & DUFAURE – merchant gave away brown sugar to the afflicted

October 24 – cooler weather and report of a frost

OCTOBER 26:

In order to ascertain the number of white inhabitants remaining in our city, a census was taken last week, and the following result shows a number far greater than we could have believed had braved the sickness under which we have suffered:

Male adults 693

Female do. 449

Children 352

Total 1494

The number of houses uninhabited are, inclusive of Decker ward, 343 (DAILY GEORGIAN)

Doctor Richard M. Berrien – Young doctor succumbed to yellow fever on September 20, 1820

Violent delirium/ convulsions/coma; bleeding from eyes, nostrils, anus and other mucous membrane; black-colored, blood-filled vomit/deterioration of the liver, kidneys and heart, yellow bile pigments from the damaged liver color the skin – symptoms of yellow fever

6 to 7 days – the amount of

time it took for the disease to run its course

60% death rate

Yellow fever ravaged port cities throughout the world from time to time – a famous infection was the Philadelphia epidemic of 1793 (Dr. Benjamin Rush was a chronicler of the disease.)

1817, 1820, 1854, 1876 – years of serious yellow fever epidemics in Savannah

Politicians: they at first denied there was an epidemic, possibly thinking it would prevent panic by portraying as it as a normal “sickly season” fever (malaria, ague); they blamed victims

15% of population of whites; 3% of blacks – the death rate of yellow fever in Savannah

666 – May to December – number of deaths

Flee the city – what officials and the health care community recommended people do

Population: estimated to be 1,500 (normal 7,500) at the height of the sickness

Committee of 4 doctors appointed – 3 died

Dr. William J. Waring – a physician in the city and a chronicler of the disease; mentioned standing water as a cause

People drank from unwashed cups, bathed infrequently, slept on dirty sheets, shared beds – not knowledgeable of modern cleanliness –

behaviors that a modern article mentions as what precipitated the illness in the 19th century

Miasma – the common belief among the health care community that the disease was caused by “bad air,” particularly from rice fields

Types of early 19th century medical treatments

- Bleeding
- Blistering – “belief that the body could only contain one illness at a time.”
- Plastering – “poultices” – cuts, wounds, bites and boils
- Puking - emetic, Purging – laxative/Calomel (mercuric chloride)
- Sweating

The Four Humors – balance (Hippocrates): blood/sanguine; phlegmatic/dull; Yellow bile/choleric; black bile/melancholic – doctors had to restore harmony of the 4

Dr. William Waring: *“The scene of sickness, misery, and ruin was awful, shocking, and well-fitted to inspire a melancholy sentiment of the shortness, uncertainty, and insignificance of life.”*

Spanish-American War/ Cuba/Dr. Walter Reed/1898-1900 – when breakthroughs in the treatment of yellow fever occurred

Vaccine/Dr. Max Theiler/1929/contracted, recovered, became immune/ Noble Prize

Acute (body wide) illness/ caused by a virus called Flauvivirus

Aedes aegypti (type – there are many types of mosquitoes) - the type of mosquito that causes yellow fever

The disease is not cured.

In the 19th century there was no understanding of the “germ theory”

Viral disease – the actual type of disease yellow fever is

level topography, warm temperature, stagnant clean water - environment hospitable to the disease

What we know about the Davenports and the yellow fever epidemic:

- very little
- Were they living in their new home by then?
- Why did they name a son Benjamin Rush Tippin Davenport? Benjamin Rush was a famous Pennsylvania patriot and physician during the Philadelphia epidemic of 1793.
- Isaiah Davenport died of the disease seven years later.
- Reg. of Deaths in Savan-

nah, GA 1818-1832; Vol. IV: **1820 4 Aug. DAVENPORT Sam’**
Age: 32; Nativity: Rhode Island; Occup: carpenter; Disease: Fever E. Broad St., Columbia Ward; Drs Sheftall & De la Motta; Resident

- Did the Davenports flee the city? We do not know.
- Children of Isaiah and Sarah at the time: Isaiah, Jr. – 5, Benjamin Rush – 3, Archibald – 1, Henry Kollock – born that year

Yellow Fever!

Savannah Epidemic of 1820
Living History Presentation
at the Davenport House

October 2010

Friday and Saturday evenings
with performances from 7:30
until 9 p.m.

Dates: October 1, 2, 8, 9, 15,
16, 22, 23, 29 and 30

Contact us: 236-8097 or
info@davenportmuseum.
org
for reservations

A limited number of places are
available for each
performance.

We suggest you get tickets in
advance.

Note: This program is
sponsored by the Davenport
House and supported solely
by patrons like you.