

Promoting Positivity: Securing Memphis's Image in Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Situating the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis's long history shows how concern over Memphis's national reputation influenced how city leaders dealt with crisis. Throughout its history, Memphis government officials and business leaders promoted Memphis as a good city to do business, free from disease and racial strife. Despite their best efforts, they could not deny explosive incidents of racially-based violence or disease outbreaks. Instead, they tried to mitigate negative repercussions on the local economy during times of crisis. When the 1878 yellow fever epidemic struck, the Citizen's Relief Committee, the impromptu government formed by business leaders after outbreak, promoted Memphis as a functioning white city that was operating the best it could under terrible circumstances so the city could resume normal economic activity once the fever passed. This became the dominant narrative, repeated by newspapers across the country in 1878 and historians today.

This narrative is problematic because it ignores black Memphians, who composed of 80% of the city's population after outbreak. Instead of recognizing black Memphians participation in relief activities, they promoted stories in the media about lazy or riotous African Americans to justify denying sufficient aid to the black community. Catholics had better luck earning the gratitude of Memphis's leaders. They worked with the white government and charities as nurses and fundraisers, and earned a glowing reputation in national newspapers. The inclusion of African Americans and Catholics in this thesis tells a more complete story and challenges white Memphians' carefully cultivated narrative.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The summer of 1878 proved to be one of the deadliest periods in Memphis's history. The yellow fever epidemic struck Memphis with ferocity, causing white Memphians to flee, the local economy to collapse, and 5,150 people to die. The city government quickly collapsed upon outbreak and a group of white businessmen stepped forward to create an impromptu government, the Citizens' Relief Committee. Like governments before it, the CRC promoted Memphis as a functioning white city that was trying its best to survive. To support this narrative, they largely ignored the contributions of black Memphians, who comprised 80% of the city, and denied them sufficient aid. This thesis situates the epidemic within Memphis's longer history to analyze how Memphis's white leaders' actions were motivated by longstanding economic and racial tensions.

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I am not a native of Memphis. In fact, I had not visited until I started this project. I owe a great deal to those who helped familiarize me with the area and its available historical resources. I would like to extend thanks to Dr. Edward Blum from San Diego State. Your existing research and our early conversation about research questions and African American sources when you visited Virginia Tech proved invaluable. I would also like to thank the staff at the University of Memphis's Special Collections and at the Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library. Their knowledge about useful archival collections and existing historiography helped immensely.

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A. Ruger's *Bird's eye view of the city of Memphis, Tennessee (1870)*¹

Introduction

Memphis had always been concerned with its image. Before the epidemic of 1878, white city leaders promoted the image of a healthy, racially harmonious city with a booming economy in order to attract new businesses investments and sell cotton across the country. A positive image was important to attract new settlers, business, and trade to the city. Local leaders pushed the image of a successful city even in times of crisis. The Civil War, racial discord, and disease threatened to expose how fragile the city's health and racial unity was, and ruin the local economy.

¹ Ruger, A. *Bird's eye view of the city of Memphis, Tennessee 1870* [n.p, 1870] Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/73694530/>.

By 1878, yellow fever would be the Memphis's greatest image problem. It would also be an actual problem. Once yellow fever came, Memphians with the financial or familial means to leave the city fled for their lives. The local government quickly collapsed under the weight of the epidemic and an impromptu government of local business leaders formed in its place. They worked alongside yellow fever relief charities to provide fever relief and operate necessary city functions. Despite the CRC's and charity's best efforts, the epidemic infected 70% of Memphis's remaining population and killed 5,150 people. Many of the Memphians who left were slow to return to the city for fear of another epidemic. Memphis became so badly depopulated that Tennessee revoked the city's charter and its economy stalled until the city embarked on much-needed sanitation reforms.

Not only did yellow fever threaten their lives, but it also threatened the power structure that upheld their political and economic supremacy and the image of racial order that Memphis tried to portray to the rest of the nation. As a result, image promotion was part of Memphians' response to the 1878 yellow fever epidemic. The Citizens' Relief Committee promoted the image of a functioning white city that was operating the best it could under terrible circumstances so the city could resume normal economic activity once the fever passed. African American and Catholic Memphians also tried to promote the image of their communities by participating in yellow fever relief activities. Only the Catholic community was successful. They earned a glowing reputation as yellow fever martyrs, while old stereotypes about African Americans remained unchanged. Memphis was so devastated by yellow fever that it was greatly depopulated and the city lost its charter.

Historians have approached yellow fever from numerous perspectives. Current historiographic trends focus on how yellow fever fits into the history of medicine and its role in

public health initiatives mandated by local, state, and federal governments. There has also been a significant surge in popular history books about yellow fever. The topic's landscape of death and despair lends itself well to gut-wrenching narratives that capture the attention of a non-academic audience. Additionally, there is a large body of literature about 19th century philanthropy and concepts of charity. Race and ethnicity has been conspicuously absent from past scholars' research. My research hopes to address this by inserting the African American and Catholic communities into the story of yellow fever. This situates the epidemic and its subsequent response within the historiography of Reconstruction.

Exploring various historiographies has been helpful to contextualize Memphis, yellow fever, and race within the context of Reconstruction America. Memphis did not exist in a vacuum—instead it was an active participant in a nation that was trying to figure out what it meant to be a city and who were citizens in the United States after the Civil War. In order to understand the events of the summer of 1878, we need to consider Memphis's history, the importance of its economy, and the role of race, ethnicity, and religion in Reconstruction.

This thesis is informed by Carl Abbott's *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West*. Abbott's monograph analyzes the economic growth of Cincinnati, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Galena, Illinois to understand the rise of the mid-western city up to 1860. He analyzes the role of boosterism in city growth and reputation maintenance. Boosterism is process by which business and civic leaders accessed the economic and social realities of their city, created an economic program to be carried out through public and private action, and then publicized the program to both local and national audiences. Abbott characterized the publicity as unabashedly flamboyant but ultimately essential to open commercial possibilities. This thesis expands Abbott's definition of boosters to create a unifying

framework to examine the Memphis and the 1878 epidemic. I expanded boosters beyond city leaders and analyzed how black and Catholic Memphians tried to promote a positive image of their communities through relief activities. These groups boosted their own narratives of Memphis and yellow fever, and sometimes they contradicted each other. The white city leaders' self-promotional narrative of a struggling city led by heroic white martyrs endured while African American relief efforts were erased.

The existing historiography has failed to challenge the narrative promoted by Memphis's white city leaders and ignored the role of black Memphians. They instead accept and perpetuate the image of Memphis as a functioning white city that operated the best it could under terrible circumstances under strong white guidance. White city leaders are depicted as heroes who risked their lives to save Memphis. This tale is partly true. Many of the leaders who stayed in the city to organize relief and necessary city functions died in service to others. They were indeed heroes to many white Memphians who received adequate assistance but not to black Memphians. They prioritized the lives of the small group of remaining white Memphians at the cost of many black Memphians. White city leaders ignored black Memphians suffering and made purposeful decisions that harmed the black community.

Popular historians in particular have produced monographs that reflect white city leaders' incomplete narrative. The popular histories written about the 1878 yellow fever epidemic offer great stories but lack analytical depth. Many popular histories are highly celebratory of the Howard Association and the Citizens' Relief Committee and reflect the uncritical 19th century description of the Howards as heroes among men. This uncritical depiction of the leading white organizations in the city falsely depicts a unified Memphis and ignores the realities of racial and

ethnic disunity. Also, their limited time frame is problematic because it removes yellow fever from its historical context in Memphis's development.²

Historians of medicine give a historical perspective on the endemic disease through their application of humanities and social science methodology. They are interested in the mechanics of the disease: how yellow fever came to the United States, its subsequent transmission, and how 18th and 19th century doctors believed it could be treated. Their research on beliefs about yellow fever resistance inform this study's understanding of how people in the 19th century understood the disease. Unsure of how yellow fever spread, Memphians created their own explanations, often based on race. Their beliefs about how fever spread reflected social ideas rather than medical realities, and often ignored visible evidence.³

Historians of public health have declared the 1878 yellow fever outbreak as the landmark year for government public health initiatives. Historians largely agree this first attempt at public health was unsuccessful because of tensions between state and federal officials over how to spend public money and economic instability. This thesis uses the historiography of public health as a larger foundation of how people and governing bodies responded to epidemics in the 19th century with both public and private money. This project continues that analysis by analyzing the governmental and private response to the 1878 epidemic, but also asks how public health fits in a broader civic and commercial context. My thesis also further complicates public

² Popular histories include Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic that Shaped Our History* (New York: Berkley, 2007) and Jeanette Keith, *Fever Season: The Epidemic of 1878 That Almost Destroyed Memphis, and the People Who Saved It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

³ Of particular use to this thesis were K. David Paterson, "Yellow Fever Epidemics and Mortality in the United States, 1693-1905" *Social Science & Medicine* 34, no. 8 (April 1992), 588-865 and Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

health historians' conclusions by including a dedicated focus on how African Americans and immigrants fit into 19th century public health.⁴

Following longstanding patterns, the Citizens' Relief Committee tried to preserve the national image of Memphis as a successful, healthy city in control of its various ethnic groups. The southern city's cotton-based economy relied on the national market and city leaders presented this happy image to promote local business and encourage outside investment. Local city leaders and businessmen refuted (true) rumors of racial discord and dirty, disease-spreading streets. When events like the 1878 yellow fever epidemic occurred, and the evidence was too expansive to deny, local leaders tried to control the narrative through the local newspapers. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* presented Memphis during the 1878 epidemic as a suffering city, but a city that could maintain law and order, preserve white supremacy over a predominantly black population, and quickly return to economic normalcy. The white media tightly controlled the narrative of the epidemic which allowed city leaders to deny sufficient yellow fever aid to Black Memphians. Instead of recognizing their plight, the newspaper depicted them as either spreaders of disease, lazy and unwilling to help with fever relief efforts, or as subhuman. This implicitly justified the CRC's decision to deny the African American community sufficient aid.

The histories of public health and charity often overlap because of 19th century beliefs about the roles of government and the private citizen in the nation. The historiography of 19th century charity can be divided into several broad categories: poor relief, freedmen's education, sanitation, higher education, museum and library building, and prison reform. Of relevance to

⁴ John Ellis and Margaret Humphrey's Research greatly informed how I understood the state and federal governments' role in yellow fever relief. John H. Ellis, *Yellow Fever & Public Health in the New South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992) and Margaret Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

this study is poor relief and sanitation. A contemporary historiographical debate revolves around the motives for private charity and public assistance; some scholars claim that charity derived from concern for social control rather than from altruistic desires. I also examine people's motivations in giving and disturbing charity during the epidemic, and ultimately agree that charity in 1878 Memphis was used to control a diverse ethnic population and secure white hierarchical power.⁵

Lastly, my thesis heavily pulls from the histories of race relations and politics during and immediately after Reconstruction, most notably in my attempt to ensure African Americans have agency in my analysis of Memphis's social upheaval. I pull from the rich historiography of race and Reconstruction, citing esteemed historians such as Eric Foner and Steve Hahn, but Heather Cox Richardson's *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* has been especially important. Her work informs and supports my research in several ways. First, I assert that the 1878 epidemic was part of the historical patterns of Reconstruction, despite occurring a year after 1877, which many historians consider the end of Reconstruction. Further, her arguments about what Americans considered special treatment greatly informs my thesis's analysis of northern donations to yellow fever. Richardson claims that Northerners believed the Southern tale that the newly freed slaves did not want to work, and instead wanted to live on governmental handouts. Her analysis has helped me understand why white newspapers

⁵ Robert H. Bremner, *The Public Good: Philanthropy and Welfare in the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1980). My argument about yellow fever charity rests upon the research of Robert Bremner. His monograph argues that the Civil War increased the burden of relief on local, state, and federal governments. Many private charities formed in hopes of assisting inefficient government organizations. My research furthers his argument through my analysis of the Howard Association, a private yellow fever relief charity.

emphasized black Memphians' reliance on government rations and the possible effects it had on Northern readers.⁶

My first chapter examines how city elites sought to maintain and protect Memphis's reputation in the face of repeated health and racial issues that occurred during the city's rapid post-war growth. City leaders promoted the image of a safe and prosperous city, despite dirty streets that created disease and ethnic and racial tension that culminated in violence. Newspaper were important mouthpieces for the elites' vision of the city. They refuted stories that the city's leaders were unwilling to clean up the streets, leading to cholera and yellow fever so people would not be afraid to move their businesses to Memphis. The 1866 Memphis Massacre destroyed the promoted falsehood that the city was free from the racial strife and violence that occurred across the South as the region adjusted and protested against freed blacks. As the nation criticized Memphis for losing control of its population, city leaders rearranged the narrative, and argued with some success that the violence was the black population's fault. These lessons on public image and how it could negatively impact Memphis's economy informed how Memphis dealt with the 1878 yellow fever epidemic.

Chapter Two analyzes how the Citizens' Relief Committee utilized the lessons Memphis learned from previous city disasters to promote the image that Memphis was operating as well as it could during the 1878 epidemic. The CRC, composed of local government leaders and businessmen, hope that Memphis would quickly resume economic activity if they showed the rest of the country that the city had an effective operating government, efficiently organized and

⁶ Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

dispersed yellow fever relief and city operations, and maintained white supremacy in a suddenly mostly black city. This promoted narrative rarely mentioned the remaining 14,000 black Memphians who were left behind in the city. White control of the media meant that black Memphians did not have a voice to complain about the insignificant portion of government rations and donated relief they received, or about the actions the CRC took that purposefully harmed the black community.

Lastly, the third chapter argues that Memphis's minority groups also tried to promote a positive self-image. African Americans and Catholics participated in relief efforts to help their communities and earn the goodwill of the white population. The CRC temporarily expanded economic and political opportunities to the black community to ease racial tensions and maintain necessary city functions, but refused to recognize black suffering and their need for sufficient aid. The Catholic Church also participated in relief efforts but unlike the black Memphians, they earned social esteem for their efforts. Newspapers depicted the serving Catholic clergy as martyrs, so they therefore gained more sympathy and access to the CRC's aid.

This study is an important because situating the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 in the longer history of Memphis's struggle for economic prominence and racial control reveals how an urban crisis can disrupt social order in the city. My thesis analyzes how Memphis's small remaining white population tried to maintain social order and preserve the image of a functioning, white city and how the emphasis on image affected yellow fever relief activities. Further, my research is important because it complicates the studies previously done on the 1878 epidemic which have accepted the narrative put forth by Memphis's white city leaders. Past research has uncritically told the heroic narrative of white Memphis, and largely ignored black Memphians, the overwhelming majority of people who remained in the city. I argue that city

leaders prioritized the lives of the small amount of remaining white Memphians at the cost of black Memphians. The inclusion of African Americans and Catholics tells a more complete story and challenges white Memphis's carefully cultivated narrative.

Chapter I

A City's Narrative Formed

The city of Memphis faced an identity crisis since its founding in 1819. The city was established on the western border of Tennessee. Many Americans saw it as a city in the West and ascribed the typical images of the uncivilized West to the town—violence, drinking, gambling, and sexual promiscuity. Memphians preferred to imagine themselves as a genteel Southern city that was built on the prosperous cotton market and participated in the Antebellum culture of respectability. Memphian businessmen worked to promote this image for the city by bragging in the newspapers about their cultural institutions and high-class social events. They also highlighted Memphis's booming economy in hopes of attracting new businesses to the city.

In order to promote Memphis's image as a prosperous city and a safe economic investment, businessmen also promoted the idea of racial harmony. This was never true. The region's huge slave population inspired perpetual fear about slave rebellions. White Memphians felt the Civil War had robbed them of their free black labor supply. The city's Irish immigrants believed freed African Americans were going to take their jobs. White Memphians convincingly argued that the city's racial hierarchy had been secure until the three-day massacre of black Memphians in 1866, which sparked national outrage and exposed Memphis's racial tensions to outsiders. After the Memphis Massacre, White Memphis went on a two-decade long publicity relations campaign to reassure the country that Memphis was a safe and secure place to live and work in.

Memphis had lived a short life before the 1878 yellow fever epidemic. The city was founded on the Fourth Chickasaw Bluff in western Tennessee, in the highly-contested Mississippi River Valley. During the late 18th century, France, Spain, and the United States

struggled for control of the Mississippi, and each built forts where Memphis would stand. Early settlers recognized the strategic importance of the site; it was one of the few sites above the floodplain between New Orleans and St. Louis, and the river was relatively narrow with a good landing for boats. This gave settlers hope that it would be well-situated to join the regional economy of the mid-South. Though the territory was originally owned by the Chickasaw Indians and few Tennesseans lived west of Nashville, speculators bought the territory in hopes of turning a profit once the city was established. This risk paid dividends after Andrew Jackson and Isaac Shelby negotiated a treaty with the Chickasaws that terminated the Indian group's claim over land in Kentucky and West Tennessee.⁷

With the threat of Chickasaw attacks eliminated, John Overton, Andrew Jackson, and James Winchester created a town in 1819, the year of the country's first economic recession. Memphis slowly grew during the next two decades. It was first a trading center for the regional American Indians, and later flatboat operators.⁸ There were still fewer than 2,000 residents in Memphis by 1840.⁹

The city grew alongside Memphis's economy. The increase in cotton production expanded businesses allied with the cotton trade. The surrounding country was highly arable, which made Memphis the lone island in a sea of cotton plantations. Memphis was a "plantation" or "agrarian" city—it collected and processed agricultural products to send to Northern cities, and then distributed Northern manufactured products to the surrounding countryside. Farmers traveled into the city to sell their bales, making Memphis the largest inland cotton market in the

⁷ Lynette Boney Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

world at the time, processing 360,000 bales of cotton per year at its peak.¹⁰ Entrepreneurs built large warehouses for crop storage and powerful compresses to reduce the size of cotton bales. Additionally, Memphis integrated itself into the United States' transportation network so it could send its cotton to the North. Memphis became a transportation hub by the 1850s, where railroad lines met steamboats and connected the city to places like the Gulf of Mexico, Charleston, and New Orleans.

The westward movement of cotton cultivation radically increased Memphis's size and reputation. By 1860, the population had grown to an impressive 22,623 people, a tenfold increase since 1840. Cotton production also moved slavery west and the slave population made up a quarter of the city. Newspaper editor and amateur historian John Keating painted white/slave relations in a relatively positive light in his retrospective *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*, claiming that "the kindest feeling existed between the negroes and white people of the town and vicinity."¹¹ He insisted that slave masters treated their slaves very well and that the "strong tendency toward manumission and deportation that then out-cropped in many places at the South nowhere stronger than in Memphis and Shelby county."¹² According to the "defensive legislation" passed in 1831, no slave could be freed unless he or she could leave the Tennessee immediately. The Tennessee legislature passed this law because they thought freed slaves would incite a slave rebellion amongst their former friends.¹³

¹⁰ Crosby, *The American Plague*, 18.

¹¹ John Keating, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee* (Syracuse, NY: G. S. MacManus Co., 1889), 160.

¹² Keating, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*, 160.

¹³ "Negroes in Tennessee," Federal Writers' Project, Tennessee, *Tennessee: A Guide to the State* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).

Keating's rosy description of race relations in Memphis during the early to mid-19th century is unlikely. Only gradual emancipation was tolerated and early abolitionist efforts never gained traction. Memphians saw most early abolitionists as dangerous radicals and worked to make their lives difficult within the city so they would leave. The Union Church, otherwise known as First Congregational Church, was not established until 1863. The money to build and furnish the structure came from an abolitionist group in Massachusetts. It had a large congregation during the Civil War because of the number of Northerners in Memphis but its membership quickly shrank after the war's end.¹⁴ The church earned the name "Strangers Church" and native Memphians' saw the church as a vehicle for Northern influence on the city's affairs. Keating described the Union Church and others like it as "vindictive" Northern institutions that furthered "political propaganda under the cover of Christ's name."¹⁵

While most Memphians' disapproved of the Union Church's abolitionist mission, they tolerated more moderate anti-slavery sentiments. Keating described Fanny Wright, a philanthropist of "historical notoriety," who embarked on a mission to establish a school for local African Americans. Wright was an outsider to Memphis—she visited Memphis in 1824 and, according to Keating, fell in love with the region and bought 1940 acres of land. Her school was meant to prepare students to be proper citizens through civic and industrial education. Wright hoped that this education would prepare them as moral citizens after emancipation and they would then become "the missionaries of civilization to their benighted race in Africa." Thus, the school's mission was not to uplift the black community to become great citizens in Memphis. Instead, Wright hoped that once the black students learned some trade skills, they

¹⁴ *History of Tennessee from the Earliest Times to the Present, together with an Historical and a Biographical Sketch of Shelby County* (Nashville: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887), 848-864.

¹⁵ Keating, *The History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*, 126.

would leave the United States and go back to Africa to spread white “civilization.” Keating called this a “beautiful dream, vain hope, but encouraging incentive to philanthropic endeavor!” He thought the school was foolish but ultimately approved of its mission because it, like manumission and deportation, would remove the African Americans from the area.

Wright also voiced disapproval of many abolitionists, further earning the approval of Keating and like-minded Memphians, who praised her for detecting the fanatical nature and mischievous zeal of the Northern abolitionist.” She claimed their “hatred of the planter seemed oftentimes to be a stronger feeling than interest in the slave.” Her quote fed into the Southern belief that North was trying to ruin the South by abolishing slavery. Keating agreed with Wright’s statement and elaborated, saying that Northern abolitionists hatred of the South “was most vindictively shown during the Civil War, and especially after and during the reconstruction period, from the surrender in 1865 to the presidential election in 1876.”¹⁶ As editor and primary writer for the primary newspaper of Memphis for over twenty years, Keating’s writings were widely read by Memphians. His long tenure and the lack of competitive opinion makes it seem likely that many Memphians shared his opinions about abolitionists and his views on the North.

Sympathy for moderate anti-slave figures like Wright faded as the institution of slavery became threatened. In addition to the political debate swirling around the country about the morality of slavery, the ever-present fear of slave rebellion intensified after Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Virginia killed over fifty whites in 1831. According to Keating, the rebellion in Virginia overwhelmingly quashed most abolitionist sentiment in Memphis and instead created “a revulsion in the minds of those at the South who were wavering as to gradual emancipation, and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

intensified the prejudices of all classes at the North.”¹⁷ The rebellion made Memphians buckle down on slavery and become more aggressive and resistant towards abolitionists. Memphians “became alarmed, and the slave code was, as a measure of the most ordinary protection, more rigidly enforced than ever in most of the Southern States.”¹⁸ This fear made Memphians more hostile to the surrounding black population, even those who worked on white plantations. Despite a few anti-slavery Memphians like Fanny Wright, the city overwhelmingly supported slavery because it was central to their social and economic structures.

Memphis and the Civil War

The Civil War drastically altered the makeup of Memphis. Before the war, African Americans were only 17% of the city’s population, and all but 198 of the 4,000 were enslaved. By 1865, African Americans made up 39% of the population and, due to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, they were all free. While the city escaped the devastation endured by Atlanta or Vicksburg, this demographic transition and military occupation drastically changed the social, political, and economic climate in Memphis.

Memphians had not wanted civil war. Even as calls for secession rang out across the South after the 1860 presidential election of Abraham Lincoln, Memphians were reluctant to join the fray for fear that secession and war would disrupt the local economy. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* reminded its readers of the importance of Northern-manufactured goods to the local economy. In November 1860, only one out of eight Memphians favored secession. They thought Lincoln’s election would neither affect the city’s economy nor abolish slavery. Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, a Memphis native, recalled “when news of South Carolina’s

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

secession reached Memphis everybody was stunned; Tennesseans did not want to quit the Union.”¹⁹ Rather than join in, some thought staying in the Union while other states in the Deep South seceded would benefit the economy and further the city’s status as a trading center for the upper South.

However, as fears about national emancipation grew between November and April, secessionists lobbied public opinion at city functions and in the newspapers. They argued that emancipation of slaves in the city and the surrounding cotton plantations would devastate the local economy and ruin Memphis. Convinced by economic fears, Memphians overwhelmingly supported the Confederate cause and, at a public meeting, resolved to leave the Union in April 1861. City residents quickly started to form militia units and many of the military-aged white men left to join the war.

Patriotic fervor was not enough to carry Memphians through difficult economic times, though and, by 1862, enthusiasm for the war was waning. The Confederate Army had experienced a string of losses and Memphians began to suffer from shortages, high prices, and the near cessation of the cotton trade. Further, Union capture of Memphis seemed imminent so many Memphians fled the city after New Orleans fell in April and nearby Corinth followed in early June. Their suspicions were right—on June 6, 1862, not even a year after Tennessee joined the Confederacy, Union naval forces took Memphis. The Union Army soon began constructing Fort Pickering, a two-mile fortification that stretched along the bluffs, with the help of six thousand impressed slaves and freed blacks.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years, 1824-1916* (McLean, VA: EPM Publication, Inc., 1994), 58.

Memphis was spared from the destruction of the Civil War because of its strategic location along the river and on railroad lines, but it changed nonetheless. Confederate sympathizers, unhappy with Union military rule, left the city in droves. Native-born white men had left to join the Confederate Army and some merchants fled to avoid working under Yankee rule. City demographics changed further as 15,000 newly freed African Americans migrated into Memphis to enjoy the relative safety of Northern protection. By 1863, only 11,000 of the prewar white population remained in the city, along with 5,000 slaves, and 19,000 newcomers. This effectively shut down Memphis's economy until Northern businessmen, popularly known as "carpetbaggers," filled the void.

The Civil War and the end of slavery changed how Memphis merchants sold cotton and attracted business. The arable land that surrounded the city made it one of the biggest inland cotton markets in the world and before 1861, local merchants had traded primarily with local big planters. After the war, emancipation changed the dynamic of labor. Big plantations lost their labor as slaves left for freedom, which created a void that small farms filled. These small farms needed goods and services. Merchants became important figures in buying cotton and supplying farmers, usually on credit in return for mortgages or liens on crops.²⁰

The cotton trade in Memphis was impacted by the modernization of the second half of the 19th century. Breakthroughs in transportation and technology, like the telegraph, cable, and bills of lading, along with the expansion of the United States' railroad network, made Memphis independent of the coastal cities, whom local merchants relied upon to market the crops. Instead, they could communicate and send cotton directly to markets in the North and overseas.²¹

²⁰ Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

In 1873, Memphis cotton buyers and factors established an exchange monitor the local economy and promote Memphis cotton across the country. The Memphis Cotton Exchange created and enforced trading rules, arbitrated disputes between buyers and sellers, kept its members up to date on cotton prices in key markets, and promoted Memphis's cotton worldwide. The Cotton Exchange also worked to steal clients from the city's most immediate rival cities—St. Louis and Louisville. The exchange became a source of information about world markets and kept members informed about other markets' crop conditions and other matters of interest. They also promoted Memphis cotton bought and sold in its market and worked to increase the volume of cotton passing through its warehouses. The exchange sent samples of different grades of cotton to New Orleans, New York, and Liverpool and requested separate quotes and prices for Memphis grades. The exchange also advertised Memphis cotton by holding a contest for the best bale of cotton. They sent the prize-winning bale to fairs across the United States and Europe so potential buyers could see Memphis's product.²²

Memphis's Evolving Demographics

Memphis's western position made it a prime city for immigration. The Irish, Germans, and Italians established early roots in the city, and lived and worked with the small Southern elite who claimed descent from British ancestry. As long as these immigrants proved their economic worth, typically by starting and running successful businesses, they were welcome in the city. The Irish were particularly good at gaining social esteem because they had been immigrating to the city in large numbers since the city's founding and many of the first successful merchants were from Ireland.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

Irish laborers worked on railroad, levee, and other construction work while Germans were more likely engaged in some type of merchandising, from peddling goods, shop keeping, or department stores. While the Irish were the most impoverished group besides African Americans, their material condition improved between 1850 and 1880. The cotton business also created white collared jobs for those who had some education. Mercantile houses needed bookkeepers and clerks. Most Irish property owners owned grocery stores. The Irish also showed a knack for public office post-Civil War. Joining the police force and fire departments gave the Irish a political voice. They held a number of political offices: for instance, John Loague arrived in Memphis as an orphan in 1860 and served as mayor from 1874 to 1875. German immigrants came in smaller numbers and were divided by religion so they were never able to unite and garner political power.²³

Mary Costillo Nickolds remembered her childhood in Memphis before the death and devastation of the Civil War and the 1878 yellow fever epidemics as a happy and prosperous time for her wealthy, Irish family. Mary was born in September of 1859 to Michael Charles Costillo, an Irish immigrant with ancestral claims that were “Spanish of Noble blood” and Ellen Doyle, a woman from “well to do Irish farmers, some of them gentry.” Mary repeated her claim to “noble blood” several times throughout both her scrapbook and memoir, perhaps to distinguish herself from the less prosperous Irish immigrants and delineate her family’s social position.²⁴

Michael Costillo owned a successful slate-roofing business, was a member of the Democratic Party, and, though Mary claims her father “was not sympathetic to slavery,” owned

²³ Wren, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis*, 7-12.

²⁴ Mary Costillo Nickolds, “Reminiscences of My Childhood and Youth,” *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* XII (1958), 81.

eight slaves.²⁵ She characterizes her family's lifestyle before the Civil War as a life of opulence. She said her "Papa was generous, even to extravagance. He gave suppers and even banquets at the hotel when he was Democratic chairman.... My mother wore silks and diamonds. We had a rockaway carriage and a team of horses and a coachman." They escaped Memphis's weather when they "traveled North every summer and to New Orleans every winter..." As a child, Mary had a fourteen-year-old slave girl named Linda deeded to her by a Colonel DuPree.²⁶ The Costillo family lived a comfortable lifestyle until after the Civil War when Michael's businesses faltered. The Costillo family's story is typical of many Memphians who experienced economic decline after the war. Some families rebounded under Union occupation; others did not. Memphians resented Northerners for what they considered meddling in their local economy and emancipating their labor source. They especially resented the newly freed African Americans who left the surrounding plantations to establish new lives in Memphis.

The African American population drastically increased during and after the Civil War. During Union occupation, escaped slaves from surrounding plantations flocked to Memphis to seek the federal army's protection, boosting the black population from 3,000 to over 15,000, nearly 40 percent of the city's population, within four short years. The surge of African Americans was not well-received by white Memphians or the Union leaders still in the city. In 1865, General Dudley of the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency that was supposed to assist former slaves transition to freedom, wrote that the city has a "surplus population of at least six thousand colored persons [who] are worthless vagrants."²⁷ The general was under constant

²⁵ Ibid, 83.

²⁶ Ibid, 83-84.

²⁷ Quoted from Kevin R. Hardwick, "Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned": Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866"

pressure from planters, military officers, and white Memphians to remove the “surplus” black population from the city and send them back to the plantations in the surrounding countryside. One of his officers, Major William Gray, remarked that “I am daily urged by influential persons in the city” to removed freed people from the city and force them to accept plantation jobs. General Dudley was not going to be the black community’s great defender. He viewed the freedmen and women as “worthless, idle, persons having no rights to claim the same benefits arising from their freedom that the industrious and honest are entitled to.”²⁸ In October 1865, he authorized patrols that arrested black Memphians indiscriminately to remove them from the city.

The Bureau and white Memphians suppressed black civil rights and justified the removal of African Americans by using vagrancy laws. Black Memphians who could not prove their employment were deemed vagrants, subject to arrest and forced into unpaid agricultural labor on “chain gangs.” Black men could be imprisoned simply by walking outside. No provocation was needed. Not even children were safe from white harassment. Warner Madison, a black Memphian, protested the harassment of blacks by police and Freedmen’s Bureau agents in Memphis. He used excessive punctuation to highlight his frustration: “I think, it is, one of the most. obnoxious. And foul, and, mean. thing. That exists on, anny. part. of. the. Beauraur [Freedman’s Bureau]. Why My Chidrem has, to, get. passes, now. to go, to. school.”²⁹ Under the guidance of city leaders, the police and strict city judges used these laws to keep the black population under their thumb and restore a social order that resembled slavery.

²⁸ Quoted from Kevin R. Hardwick, “Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned”: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1993), 113-115.

²⁹ Quoted from Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 112.

Black Memphians built their lives amid stark racial hatred and predatory policies meant to abuse their labor. They built their homes either on the outskirts of Memphis or in South Memphis, near Fort Pickering, to protect themselves from white or immigrant retaliation. African Americans lived in what Memphians considered the worst housing in the worst areas—they lived along railroad tracks and the filth-filled bayous and creeks. Their neighborhoods were described by white visitors as “shanty towns” and their houses as “old, dank, and decayed.” Some who worked for white families lived in backyard residences in the seventh ward, the neighborhood where most of the upper-class whites lived.³⁰

Memphis also held economic opportunities for African Americans, many of whom were newly freed slaves. The jobs offered were typically the most dangerous and labor-intensive jobs. They hauled cotton bales on the wharves, at the warehouses, and at railroad depots. They were almost the entire workforce for the cottonseed oil mill. Whites thought black bodies were better suited for these jobs because of the popular yet erroneous scientific belief that African Americans rarely caught yellow fever or malaria. The *Memphis Medical Journal* claimed that “the negro race seems by nature peculiarly well adapted to this climate and as a consequence constitute the great mass of the laboring population.”³¹ African American women also engaged in economic activity. They did domestic work like laundry, cooking, and cleaning for their white neighbors and former masters.

By 1870, only about 4% of black families owned property, and 75% of black property owners reported property valued at less than \$450. The top five richest African American

³⁰ *First Report of the State Board of Health of the State of Tennessee, Apr. 1877-Oct. 1880* (Nashville: Tavel & Howell, 1880), 355.

³¹ *Mississippi Valley Medical Monthly* 3 (March 1883), 520.

property owners were a tailor (\$50,000), a laborer (\$25,000), a female servant (\$20,000), a barber (\$16,000), and the owner of a grocery and saloon (\$10,000). This was dwarfed in comparison to the two wealthiest white Memphians each of whom owned property valued at \$800,000.³²

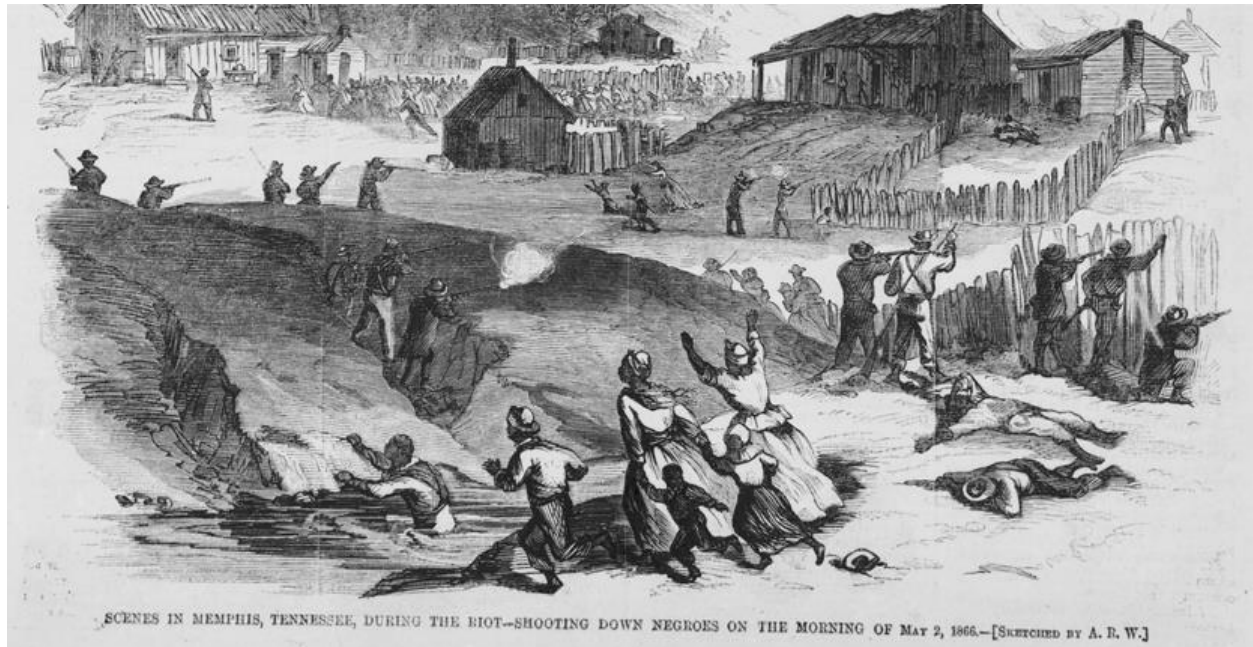
Robert Church rose to be one of the city's most affluent African American business owner. Church was born a slave to Captain C. B. Church, his father and owner. He worked Captain Church's boats and elevated his position to steward, the highest position a slave could then occupy. He never had the opportunity to go to school but, according to his daughter, Mary Church Terrell, learned to "read by constantly perusing the newspapers and always kept abreast of the times."³³ After emancipation, he bought a saloon that became very successful. He married Lou Church, a woman who "possessed remarkable business ability" and owned a successful hair store in Memphis. The hair shop was located "in the most exclusive business section in Memphis, right off Court Square." Mary Terrell, in her autobiography, ruminated that she doubted "very much whether [her mother] or any other colored woman could rent a story in such a prominent business section" at her time of writing in 1940. The Church family became leaders in the African American opportunity but their success also made them a target for spiteful whites.

Relations between African Americans and the Irish were particularly hostile because they competed for the same low-skilled jobs. This put African Americans at a particular disadvantage because the Irish composed nearly 80% of Memphis's police force. When racial tensions

³² Wren, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis*, 12.

³³ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1940), 35.

erupted in brief violent clashes or when someone charged an African American with a crime, black Memphians could not seek legal recourse and were instead met with severe beatings.³⁴



Depiction of the 1866 Memphis Massacre³⁵

Tensions between black Memphians and the rest of Memphis came to a head in 1866 with the massacre of forty-six African Americans. The massacre indicates the ferocity of racial tensions in Memphis; the arrival of so many African Americans to Memphis and the success of a few black business owners upset the remaining white and immigrant population who had concerns about the character of the city and their job security. White Memphians also had to listen to the garrisoned black troops at Fort Pickering. Most native-born Southern whites of Memphis had been secessionists during the War and served in the Confederate army. Many were furious about federal occupation and their political disenfranchisement, unreceptive to equal rights for freed people, and derisive of Yankee “carpetbaggers” in the city. Though

³⁴ James Gilbert Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction” *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 3 (July 1977), 244-245. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716953>.

³⁵ Scenes in Memphis, Tennessee During the Riot. Digital image. *Memories of a Massacre: Memphis in 1866*. Accessed October 10, 2016. <http://www.memphis.edu/memphis-massacre/>.

Memphis fell quickly, most in the city remained unrepentant and considered the black soldiers in the city another Union effort to humiliate the South. Memphis's newspapers, typically run by former rebels, had published sensational editorials about blacks and Northerners for months leading up to the massacre.³⁶

These festering tensions exploded on April 30, 1866, when a verbal confrontation between a group of Irish police officers and black troops broke out on a Memphis street corner. The scuffle evolved into a full-scale battle between any African Americans wearing a Union uniform and the police department. The Irish police officers thought the former black soldiers were acting above their station, and were challenging the Irish's racial superiority. White rioters soon joined the chaos, targeting black property and businessmen.

It took a detachment of federal troops from Fort Pickering five hours to stop the violence.³⁷ However, that peace was only temporary. By nightfall, a large white mob composed of the Irish, Italians, native whites, and even prominent city officials descended upon the black community's neighborhoods.³⁸ According to Ellen Dilts, a recent immigrant to Memphis from the North, a police officer shouted out to the crowds of whites to "Kill every nigger, no matter who, men or women."³⁹ Unchecked, the violence continued until the federal troops declared martial law on the afternoon of May 3rd. The damage to the black community was devastating. The mob murdered 46 blacks, raped at least five black women, robbed over 100 victims, severely

³⁶ Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), Kindle e-book, LOC 87

³⁷ Ryan, "The Memphis Riots of 1866," 243.

³⁸ T. W. Gilbreth. *T. W. Gilbreth to Major General O. O. Howard & Commissioner B. R. F. & A. L., May 26, 1866*. Letter. From Teaching American History. *Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee*. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-freedmens-bureau-report-on-the-memphis-race-riots-of-1866/>.

³⁹ Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, LOC 134.

beat ten men, and destroyed 91 houses, four churches, and 12 schools. Contemporary estimates evaluated the damage at over \$100,000.⁴⁰

Though no black Memphian was safe, whites specifically target successful African Americans and their businesses. This indicated the resentment white Memphians felt towards prosperous blacks. While the Civil War had not destroyed Memphis's economy, many whites felt embarrassed by how quickly the Union captured the city and resented the emancipation of the free labor source. The quick success of black Memphians added insult to injury.

Albert Harris, a shoemaker and former slave, was at home the night of May 2 when a gang of white men, some of them policemen, broke into his house. One man put a pistol to his head while his wife sobbed in fear. They robbed him and threatened to burn his house down. Robert Reed Church, an African American saloon owner, was also sought out by the white crowd.⁴¹ His daughter, Mary Church Terrell, described the horrifying event in her memoir. Her father had been warned by friends that he was one of the black men the crowd wanted to shoot. Her mother and his friends begged him not to leave his house but "he went to work as usual in spite of the peril he knew he faced." Members of white mob broke into his business and shot him in the back of the head, leaving him to die. Church survived and was left with a hole in the back of head deep enough one could insert the tip of a little finger. The injury left him with migraines so severe that they immobilized him and sometimes moved him to threaten suicide.⁴²

Terrell's account of the massacre indicates that the event was not wholly spontaneous. Once the violence started, the white mob planned whom they were going to kill, specifically

⁴⁰ Ryan, "The Memphis Riots of 1866," 243.

⁴¹ Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, LOC 148.

⁴² Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 36.

targeting successful African Americans. Despite the testimony of black Memphians, including Church, who saw his attackers, no whites received punishment and no African Americans were compensated for their material loss. Instead, African Americans rebuilt their churches and schools and became more insular within their neighborhoods and institutions, opting for self-preservation.

This was the first large-scale race riot in the South after the Civil War. The gruesome details were printed in newspapers across the country and begged the question that was on everyone's mind: How would the South be assimilated back into the Union? President Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and Southern Unionist, wanted the former Confederate States quickly restored to the Union and was willing to let the South decide what to do with recently freed people, and vetoed the Republican Congress's two bills to protect emancipated slaves. The violence of the massacre highlighted the issue of African American safety and threw Republicans into an outrage.⁴³ Radicals in Congress even declared the South was plotting another rebellion.⁴⁴ Police participation in the massacre threatened the foundational idea that the government should protect its citizens from violence. The House of Representatives passed a resolution eleven days after the massacre ended, creating the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots.⁴⁵

Elihu Washburne, a long-serving Representative from Illinois, was appointed to oversee Congress's investigation of the massacre. He received letters from friends in Memphis that described the days of the massacre, read the newspapers' reports, and was informed by the

⁴³ Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, LOC 100-113.

⁴⁴ Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years*, 165.

⁴⁵ Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, LOC 100-113.

Freedmen's Bureau and the local military commandant's prior (and not as thorough) investigation of the riot.⁴⁶ He arrived at the Memphis and Ohio depot with his fellow committee members on May 22. The proceedings began the next day in Parlor 398 of the Gayoso House, the nicest hotel in Memphis. The committee's first witness was Major General George Stoneman, commander of the Department of Tennessee who was headquartered in Memphis. Stoneman answered questions about threats made against Northerners during the riot, the crowd demographics of the mob, and what the Memphis newspapers reported. In contradiction to the Memphis newspapers, Stoneman claimed "the negroes had nothing to do with the riot, except to be killed and abused."⁴⁷

Elizabeth Meriwether, a native white Memphian, attended the Congressional Committee meetings with a friend, and scoffed at their findings. Meriwether was the wife of a Confederate general and later a notable suffragette. During the Civil War, Meriwether was banned from Memphis by General William T. Sherman under Union occupation. Seven months pregnant, she fled the city with her two small boys and wandered the South for the next two years. She blamed the Union and newly emancipated African Americans after for her difficult past. Her husband was a founder of the Ku Klux Klan, and the Meriwethers' hosted organization meetings in their home, which indicates how the Meriwether family felt about their black neighbors.

She listened to Francis Thompson and Lucy Smith testify. The African American women claimed that seven former Confederate soldiers entered their homes and gang raped them for hours. Meriwether and her friend were positive that these women were lying because they could "not believe that a Confederate could entertain for such repulsive looking creatures any feeling

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, LOC 56-67.

⁴⁷ *The Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives Made During the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress, 1865-1866*, Vol 1 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1866), 50-51.

but that of disgust.” She attacked their femininity by referring to Thompson as “the big, black witness” and describing her as a “coal black” woman with “kinky wool on her head, thick, coarse lips, the upper one showing distinct marks of a stiff mustache, closely shaved off.”⁴⁸

Meriwether’s masculine depiction of the black women was meant to imply that the white men would not be sexually-interested in them. She did not believe a Confederate soldier would lower themselves to rape someone so big, unfeminine, and most importantly, un-white.

Meriwether sat in disbelief as Washburn and the rest of the Congressional Committee believed their testimony and shed tears at their harrowing story. The Committee issued a statement about the rapes in their report, saying:

the crowning acts of atrocity and diabolism committed during the riots was the ravishing of colored women by these fiends in human shape...It is a singular fact that while the rebel mob was shooting down negroes as if they were dogs, yet they found unprotected colored women they at once conquered their prejudices and violated unprotected colored women with the most licentious brutality...⁴⁹

This account, and other statements like it were read throughout the country in newspapers as the results of the Congressional Committee were reported. Readers in the North were aghast and white Memphians immediately began to face negative economic consequences. The city faced a publicity fall out as Americans across the country (but especially in the North) criticized Memphis for being unable to manage its racial tensions. Further, massacres did not promote economic stability and made outside investors nervous about Memphian business.

White Memphians responded by placing the blame for the riots on the black community.⁵⁰ Instead of calling it a massacre, they labeled it a “race riot.” J.M. Keating, an

⁴⁸ Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years*, 165.

⁴⁹ Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years*, 166.

⁵⁰ Jeanette Keith, *Fever Season*, 11-13.

Irish immigrant and editor of the *Memphis Daily*, continued to uphold this misrepresentation in his 1888 publication, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*. According to his description, the Freedmen's Bureau, which he called "odious" in several instances throughout his book, encouraged black troops to be proud of their status as Union Army soldiers, which made them "very imprudent and self-assertive."⁵¹ He claimed this unbridled pride made them no longer respect the hierarchical boundaries of race and they began to assault white women and men. "In overawing numbers [black soldiers] became more and more threatening" and the heightened racial tensions created "a growing feeling on the part of the best people that unless they were removed bloodshed must ensure." Keating claimed white native Memphians first took the peaceful route and petitioned President Andrew Johnson to have the black regiments removed from the city but they were unsuccessful. In a skillful move, he implied that the violence was Johnson's and the North's fault. Their aggressive punishment of the South created an unsafe environment for Memphians so they had to take action. He alleged that the riot would not have happened had their petition been heeded, thereby excusing the riotous actions of White Memphians, whom he claimed had no other choice but to resort to violence.⁵²

Other Memphians also defended white Memphis in print. Meriwether reflected upon the Memphis Massacre in memoir and concluded there was at least "one good result" from the violence: "the improved behavior of the negroes." She asserted that "white men and women were no longer pushed out into the streets; white women no longer needed to fear to go about the city alone; negro soldiers no longer swaggered about the streets, feeling and acting as if they owed the city." In her eyes, the massacre, which she called a "race riot," reestablished white

⁵¹ Keating, *The History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*, 126.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 568-569.

supremacy over the city and black Memphians in their place. She thought African Americans finally respected the police, and celebrated when her neighbors moved out of the white neighborhood “to a less respectable quarter when they found their drunken orgies could no longer be indulged in without prompt arrest and a sentence of thirty days or more on the Chain Gang.”⁵³ To get the cottage ready for new white tenants, the place had to be “cleansed and purified and pampered and repaired.” Meriwether implied that simple cleaning was not enough remove the aftermath of its former black tenants.

In addition to running a public relations campaign on the city’s race relations, city officials also had to minimize Memphis’s reputation for being a sickly city. The increase in population correlated with the increase of disease and filth in Memphis. In contrast with Memphis’s economic success, the city was an utter failure in public hygiene—the city’s infrastructure could not keep up with the continuous influx of people. Sanitation was a nightmare as neighborhoods without any waterworks became overcrowded. The city’s Nicholson street pavement, a network of pitch and cypress wood blocks was only a decade old but already “decaying and sending forth a poison that none in the city limits could avoid.”⁵⁴ Memphis also had no sanitary regulations for construction, so “the cellars of the houses in the leading thoroughfares...manufactured noxious gases which stole out and made the night air an almost killing poison.”⁵⁵ Without any public service to remove waste, people dumped their trash in the street, where it was eaten by wandering pigs, or in the sewage-filled Gayoso Bayou, which turned the once flowing stream that cut through the city into a stagnant pool that smelt of human waste and animal carcasses. The situation was made even worse when a powerful storm tore through Memphis and the Bayou

⁵³ Meriwether, *Recollections of 92 Years*, 168.

⁵⁴ Keating, *A History of Yellow Fever*, 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

rose over the banks and poured its filth-filled waters into the low-lying immigrant and African American neighborhoods.

Memphis's lack of effective sewage and water systems was its grossest violation of the city's public health. In 1878, there were only four and a half miles of privately-owned sewers, located in the affluent commercial areas of the city. Most Memphians used outdoor privies, which either emptied into the Bayou Gayoso or saturated the soil until it "was reeking with the offal and excreta of ten thousand families." This was highly unsanitary because most Memphians collected water from cisterns and wells, which collected rainwater and surface drainage. These vessels were often old and leaded, which allowed contaminants from the soil to infiltrate the water. Further, these wells were perfect breeding grounds for the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitos, which spread yellow fever.⁵⁶

Accounts written in the 1870s by Memphian doctors and public officials described the city as extremely unhealthy. Doctor J. H. Erskine paints a foul picture after a cholera outbreak in 1873: "Privies had remained unemptied for years, and were in many places running over with the foul accumulations. In many parts of the city ponds of water were undrained and stagnant, evaporating the filth [of] the streets and lots which poured into them."⁵⁷ The lack of sanitation efforts created a very sickly city prone to disease. Relatively small outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever visited the city every few years, leaving death and devastation in its wake. The African American and immigrant populations were especially vulnerable because they lived near the bayou, where all of the city's filth eventually flowed.

⁵⁶ Keating, *History of Yellow Fever. The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, in Memphis, Tenn., Embracing a Complete List of Dead, the Names of the Doctors and Nurses Employed, Names of All Who Contributed.* (Memphis: Howard Association, 1880), 103.

⁵⁷ J. H. Erskine, "Epidemic of 1873 at Memphis, Reported by Dr. J. H. Erskine, Late President, Board of Health," in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, the Cholera Epidemic of 1873 in the United States, 43^d Cong., 2d sess., Ex. Doc. 95 (Washington, D.C., 1875), 139. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015018329881>.

Memphis's city officials despised their town's dirty and unhealthy reputation because it negatively affected their economic opportunities. When cholera and yellow fever epidemics struck, they stalled any ongoing business within the city as Memphians feared to venture outside the homes to work and quarantined goods could not leave the city. This economic shutdown affected all Memphians, from business owners who lost their profits to laborers who were unable to buy food without work. During past epidemics, city officials—most of whom were businessmen—worked together to stabilize the local economy and minimize the negative national attention Memphis received as to not scare away possible investors. This concern over business interests continued throughout the 1878 epidemic as Memphis continued to promote a positive image of a functioning city.⁵⁸

Despite the unhealthy conditions and the negative press coverage, city leaders were slow to take action. The city was already in debt and the government was concerned that strict quarantine practices and sanitary reforms would slow the growth of the city's manufacturing and cotton trade. Memphis did form Boards of Health, but they met irregularly and had no independent authority or funding to respond to any yellow fever episodes or sanitation concerns.⁵⁹

City officials used the *Memphis Daily Appeal* to mollify concerns over the city's sanitation and ensure the outside world that Memphis was a good place to do business. On the eve of the 1878 epidemic, the *Daily Appeal* wrote that "Memphis is about the healthiest city on the continent at present" and that "we need not fear in Memphis. We were never in as good a

⁵⁸ Ben Evans, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 and Public Health Reform in Memphis," Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies (2012), 6.

⁵⁹ Ben Evans, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 and Public Health Reform in Memphis," 7.

condition from a sanitary point of view...Nothing in our atmosphere invites that dreaded disease.”⁶⁰ The coming deadly summer would prove this statement terribly false.

Conclusion

The economy was at the forefront of Memphians’ minds at every major event. War, disease, immigration—all changes were met with concerns that they would negatively impact what was a booming economy by the 1850s. Memphians were particularly concerned with their national reputation. As a new city, Memphians felt it was important to promote the image of a prosperous and safe city. They hoped then that people across the country would be more inclined to visit, work with local businesses, and even open their own businesses in Memphis.

Part of reputation maintenance was promoting the idea of a racially harmonious city. To Memphis’s city leaders this meant both advancing policies of white supremacy while upholding a narrative of racial cooperation. The 1866 massacre destroyed the idea that Memphis was a place free from the racial discord that occurred across the South as white Southerners acclimated and rebelled against the idea of freed blacks. Newspapers across the country chided Memphis for losing control of their racially diverse population and allowing such explosive violence to occur. Some articles worried about how this would impact business ties. As a result, Memphis’s government and associated media had to go on a publicity offensive, assuring national readers that it was the fault of the haughty black population. The lesson that racial discord and national image can negatively impact Memphis’s economy loomed heavily in Memphians’ minds over the next few decades, and informed how they answered the next public health crisis—the yellow fever epidemic of 1878.

⁶⁰ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 22, 1878. America’s Historic Newspapers.

Chapter II

A City Sickened

On the second week of September 1878, Dr. William T. Ramsey gave an interview to the *Washington Post* and claimed Memphis's white women were under attack. He depicted a city that was so horribly ravaged by yellow fever and scant on resources "that the best a white woman can do is have a male negro nurse; and strange as it may seem, I was authentically informed that these negro nurses will take advantage of their helpless white victims, even while they are in the agonies of death." According to Ramsey, white women, in the throes of death, were vulnerable to sexual assault and miscegenation by the untrustworthy black nurses. Ramsey's story implied that Memphis was so desperate and chaotic that the acting government could not control its black population nor protect their white women.⁶¹

This salacious story was reprinted in newspapers across the country, inciting alarm amongst the national readership. Memphis was forced to respond and defend its reputation.⁶² The *Washington Post* telegraphed Keating, the editor of the *Daily Appeal*, to confirm Ramsey's allegations. Keating strongly rebuked the claim, saying "no charge ever made was so baseless, so wanton, so cruel, so unjust." Then, in terms that contradicted much of his previous writing, he declared African Americans in Memphis to be "deferential and respectful to the white race, and as soldiers, policemen, and nurses were earnest, honest, and devoted." While he considered

⁶¹ *Washington Post*, September 13, 1878. Reprinted in *Daily Appeal*, September 14; *New Hampshire Sentinel*, September 19, 1878; *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, September 14, 1878; *New Orleans Times*, September 15, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

⁶² *Ibid.*

many of them “idle” and “shiftless and thriftless,” Keating asserted that local African Americans “were neither cruel nor criminal in this direction.”⁶³

Keating’s refutation had little to do with defending African Americans’ character. Preserving Memphis’s reputation for the rest of the country was Keating’s main concern. If people believed that African American nurses could soil Memphis’s white women through miscegenation without repercussion, then they would think there was no law and order in the city. Therefore, it would not be a safe place to visit or conduct business after the fever ended. By refuting this rumor, Keating upheld the native white Memphians’ power over the city and its inhabitants.

Upholding Memphis’s image as a functioning city that defended the racial hierarchy of post-Reconstruction America was an important strategy for Memphians to ensure the city quickly returned to normal after the epidemic passed. The remaining white Memphians joined together to form the Citizens’ Relief Committee (CRC) so they could contain the fever and restore Memphis so commerce could resume quickly after the fever passed. The CRC had a two-pronged approach to yellow fever relief. The CRC acted as the city’s temporary governing to maintain city functions, and worked with the Howard Association, a yellow fever relief charity, to raise and distribute charity. They also worked with media sources to project the image of a city in control and to promote the heroic deeds of (white) yellow fever relief workers to newspaper readers across the country. The *Daily Appeal*, edited by CRC member John Keating, regularly printed articles about the bravery of the CRC and Howard members, and depicted

⁶³ Keating, *A History of Yellow Fever*, 113-114.

Memphis as a functioning city that upheld white dominance over the mostly black remaining population.

The Early Days of the Epidemic

Rumors of yellow fever floated up the Mississippi River to Memphis during June of 1878, inciting fear and confusion amongst Memphians as they debated about whether they should leave the city. Thoughts about past epidemics weighed heavily in their minds. Yellow fever had frequently come to Memphis since the city's founding, with visitations in 1828, 1855, and 1867, but the most recent 1873 epidemic was the worst to date. The 1873 epidemic claimed 2,000 lives in Memphis, which at the time was the most yellow fever deaths in an inland city. With such a deadly epidemic in Memphis's recent memory, the heavy threat of death loomed in residents' recent memory as they considered whether to leave or stay in 1878.

Memphis's merchants and businessmen met once they heard word of the fever to discuss how they could prevent panic amongst residents and preserve Memphis's national image. They decided that issuing an early quarantine would create the illusion of safety and subdue people's instincts to flee. When people fled, business essentially came to a standstill. Shops closed, cotton stopped entering the city, and there was nobody left to employ the poor laborers who were left behind. If they could subvert the panic, the city's economy would be stalled for only a short time and business could quickly resume normal activity. However, the city's doctors disagreed with this approach and thought quarantine so soon was unwarranted. They convinced city officials to wait until they had a confirmed case of yellow fever.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ J.M. Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis* (Memphis, TN: The Howard Association, 1879), 102-105.

The city remained unprotected until the death of Kate Bionda, an Italian snack-house keeper, was declared as the first official yellow fever case on July 14, 1878. Only then did Mayor John Randolph Flippin issue a proclamation ordering quarantine stations on President's Island, at the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, at Germantown, on the Mississippi and Tennessee Railroad, and at Whitehaven Station. Quarantine stations were placed at transportation junctions so quarantine officers could prevent people from entering or leaving the city. In hopes that yellow fever would come and go quickly, businessmen supported quarantine effects because they thought that a quarantine would be an inexpensive "precautionary measure" that would encourage trade by enhancing Memphis's reputation as a safe and careful city.⁶⁵

The city threw itself into sanitation efforts. Mayor Flippin designated all policemen as sanitation officers and allocated \$8,000 for carbolic acid to disinfect the city's streets. To minimize the quarantine's disruption of business, leading merchants organized a voluntary Citizens' Sanitary Commission to assist the Board of Health and city government. When the quarantine proved ineffective by the end of July, the prominent businessmen who remained in the city contributed their own money to buy the supplies that workers needed to clean the streets in hopes this would rid the city of the fever.⁶⁶ By August 8, the group had raised \$6,000 to employ quarantine detectives on railroads to prevent any sick people from entering the city and bought a cannon for the quarantine station on President's Island to intimidate people with the threat of violence so they would not break quarantine.⁶⁷ Despite these efforts, businesses closed almost immediately as the fever arrived in Memphis and people fled the city by the thousands.

⁶⁵ Keith, *Fever Season*, 25.

⁶⁶ Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health in the New South*, 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

Flee the City

News of the fever invoked such panic that it broke down routine, order, and social law as desperate Memphians left the city with little more than their lives on trains packed to the point of suffocation. Robert Reed Church, one of the few affluent African American Memphians, put his daughter, Mary Church Terrell, on a train after her grandmother's neighbor fell ill with what they suspected was yellow fever. Terrell recalled the train station as a crowded and desperate place: "no one who left Memphis that night can ever forget the scene... The whole population seemed to be at the station trying to leave... Those who were going were weeping and those who could not go were crying as though their hearts would break."⁶⁸ Chaos broke out as passengers, most of whom composed the city's aristocracy, ignored normal social cues and instead exhibited "a pushing, noisy, self-asserting, and frenzied rudeness that was not abashed even in the presence of refined, delicate, and sensitive women." To meet the enormous demand, railroad officials increased the number of cars but the "stream of passengers seemed to be endless." Those who could not secure passage legally resorted to violence. Men who were denied entry to the cars armed themselves and forced their way on; Some even crawled through open car windows, much to the protestations of the women in the seats they clambered over.⁶⁹

As Terrell boarded her train, a man's voice rose above the clamor of the train station, exclaiming "You are trying to run away from death. You are leaving us poor folks behind to die. We haven't got enough money to get out of the city. But you had better look out. Death can find you wherever you are going just as easily as he can find us here with yellow fever."⁷⁰ The unidentified man was a part of Memphis's large working class who were stuck in a city gripped

⁶⁸ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 68.

⁶⁹ Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis*, 108.

⁷⁰ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 68

by disease, abandoned by their affluent neighbors to fend for themselves. By August 17, 27,000 people had fled Memphis with little more than their lives and a few belongings. Of the 20,000 who remained, 14,000 were African Americans and 6,000 were poor Irish and Italian immigrants.⁷¹ A handful of affluent white citizens remained at risk of death to manage the city, look after their property, and care for the sick.

Memphis's white flight had consequences for the city. The absence of the professional and merchant class caused the near shutdown of the city's business and economy. This meant two things for the city's merchant class: the city's elite would make very little money during the epidemic, and they had to leave their property in a city of mostly immigrants and African Americans. The loss of profit and the possibility of property theft was a deterrent to leaving. With thousands of houses empty and few remaining city officials, people feared there would be a surge in mob violence and property theft. Further, a serious epidemic and the abandonment of the city would be in all the newspapers and would worsen Memphis's reputation as a dirty, sickly city. This would affect the city's ability to attract new investments and residents in the future. While some of the remaining Memphians stayed to help others, even at great personal risk, others stayed to defend their business interests within the city. The latter people's participation in yellow fever relief ranged from protecting their personal businesses from looting to active involvement in relief activities.

The fever raged and spread across the city with such rapidity that it quickly became obvious that it would take more than basic sanitation to end the epidemic. By the first week in August, the city government and Memphis' Board of Health ceased to function. With their

⁷¹ Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health in the New South*, 43.

salaries four months in arrears, most of the police department quit and took their families out of the city. Important city officials who chose to stay, like Mayor Flippin, Chief of Police Philip Athey, and what was left of the police force, caught the fever. The epidemic created a power vacuum within the city's government.

The city's remaining businessmen, concerned about Memphis's economy and reputation, took it upon themselves to form an acting city government called the Citizens' Relief Committee (CRC). The group was made up of merchants, bankers, and professional men who united under the chairmanship of Charles G. Fisher, a forty-one-year-old partner of Gage and Fisher Cotton Factories. Fisher fought in the Confederate Army, a fact lauded in the newspapers and used to support his position as chairman. He was also accustomed to local government; he represented the Sixth Ward on the Board of Councilmen for several years.⁷² Other notable CRC members were Major W. A. Willis, superintendent of the Southern Express Company, former Attorney-General Luke E. Wright, grocer J. G. Lonsdale, J.M. Keating, editor of the *Daily Appeal, Ledger* editor Ed Whitmore, Doctor S. R. Clarke, doctor and merchant D. T. Porter, Colonel James S. Prestidge, banker W. W. Thatcher, Congressman Casey Young, Doctor D. F. Goodyear, merchant Samuel M. Jobe, Reverend Dr. Slater, and Captain Maccabe, the commissary in charge of stores.⁷³ Each man had a big enough investment in Memphis's physical and economic health to risk their lives.

The Citizens' Relief Committee protected their community by funneling most of their relief efforts towards the native white population of Memphis. This caused African American and immigrant communities to suffer with little reprieve under the burden of yellow fever.

⁷² Charles Fisher Obituary, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 27, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

⁷³ Keating, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee*, 665.

White native Memphians had first access to rations, Howard doctors and nurses, and quarantine camps. The CRC denied black and immigrant Memphians these resources, which forced ethnic groups to create their own yellow fever charities with limited resources. These groups typically operated along ethnic lines, caring for the sick in their communities and asking for relief from their ethnic groups across the country.

The Citizens' Relief Committee partnered with the Howard Association to raise money and donations from across the country, and to nurse the sick. The Howard Association was a charity originally organized by practicing doctors during a yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans in 1867. The goal of the organization was to raise money for fever relief and organize health professionals and volunteers to care for yellow fever victims. Since 1867, the Howards grew throughout the South to gain national acclaim as they faced deadly medical horrors. They started chapters in most major Southern cities and their bravery in the face of disease earned them a martyred or saint-like image as people across the country read accounts of the Howards battling cholera and yellow fever epidemics in New Orleans, Memphis, Norfolk, Charleston, and many small cities and towns throughout the South. The Howards were instrumental to the CRC during the 1878 epidemic. Not only did they nurse the sick (though they diverted most of their efforts to white or Irish immigrants), they worked with the CRC to promote Memphis's national reputation. Hand in hand, the two organizations raised and distributed half a million dollars as they saw fit, nursed the sick, and buried the dead.⁷⁴

The Memphis Howard Association had originally organized for the 1878 outbreak under President Butler Anderson, but he left the city to assist the relief efforts in Grenada, Tennessee.

⁷⁴ Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health*, 44.

While there, he contracted fever and died before he could return to Memphis. After Anderson's death, the Howards formed under the direction of A. D. Langstaff, a hardware store owner who served as the association's vice president. Langstaff, originally from Canada, came to Memphis in 1865 and was an original founder of the Memphis Howard Charter in 1867. Though originally an immigrant to Memphis, his business interests in Memphis Cotton aligned him with the Citizens' Relief Committee because he had a stake in Memphis's economic return to normalcy.⁷⁵

The Howards ultimately followed the directives of the Citizens' Relief Committee, who used the Howards as a tool to maintain their political power. The Committee directed the Howards to focus their relief efforts on Memphis's small remaining native white population, which left the other ethnic communities to care for themselves.⁷⁶ The Committee ignored any charges of prejudiced distribution by Memphian African Americans and immigrants, and indirectly justified their distribution methods through their descriptions of yellow fever victims in the newspapers. Newspapers labeled white native Memphians and the nursing doctors and clergy as martyrs deserving of aid and sympathy while they viewed African Americans, immigrants, and even Protestant ministers that fled the city as unwilling to help with the relief efforts, transmitters of yellow fever, and lazy men who relied on rations for support rather than working.

Langstaff and his cabinet divided the city into districts and sent out teams of "visitors," volunteer men and women identifiable by their yellow silk armbands, to look for white native fever victims. Once the Howards found the sick, they sent physicians and nurses to the patients'

⁷⁵ Keating, *History of Yellow Fever*, 113.

⁷⁶ *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878. A List of Over Ten Thousand Victims, Martyr Death-Roll of Volunteer Physicians, Nurses, etc.* (Louisville: John P. Morton and Company, 1878), 61.

homes to care for them, rather than moving the ill to hospitals.⁷⁷ The visitors, who usually did not have medical training, would return periodically to the homes to drop off food and medicine and make sure the nurses were doing their jobs. White neighborhoods received the most attention. African Americans and, to some extent, immigrants received very few resources, despite composing most of the population.⁷⁸

The money and donations raised by the Howards funded the existence of the Citizens' Relief Committee and the Committee's relief strategies. At the beginning of summer during the 1878 epidemic, the Howards only appealed to fellow Southerners for donations, but soon the whole nation took a horrified interest as they read tragic stories about yellow fever in the newspapers. Soon unsolicited donations of money and clothing poured in from all over the country. The Howards realized they could use the country's sympathy to their advantage and started to send appeals across to all big cities' chambers of commerce and their charitable citizens. In response to their requests, the Memphis Howards received almost \$400,000 in gifts to employ 111 doctors and 2,995 nurses, and buy medicine. An additional \$200,000 funded the Citizens' Relief Committee's temporary government and their distribution of clothing, bedding, and rations.⁷⁹

Historian Edward Blum argued in his monograph, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism*, that Northerners were especially eager to donate to yellow fever relief in an attempt at national reconciliation after the Civil War.⁸⁰ This strategy was

⁷⁷ Keating, *History of Yellow Fever*, 113.

⁷⁸ Hattie A. Milton, "Tennessee: Material and Spiritual Value of the Yellow Fever Fund," *The American Missionary* 33, no. 5 (May 1878).

⁷⁹ Ellis, *Yellow Fever and Public Health in the New South*, 51-52.

⁸⁰ Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

successful, as Keating's response to charity shows. While Keating's previous writings disparaged the North as tyrants, he now called them kind-hearted and caring in an attempt to draw national sympathy and donations. He boasted about the Northern character and claimed one Northerner told him in a letter "we send...what we can; but you who know what you need, must ask— 'ask and ye shall receive.'" Northern generosity occurred in many different places; churches took up collections and public spaces had boxes for contributions.⁸¹

Citizens and businessmen in Chicago, New York, Baltimore, Providence, Rochester, Pittsburg, San Francisco, Detroit, Milwaukee, Buffalo, Philadelphia, and even smaller cities such as Hartford, Oil City, and Wheeling sent goods and money. New York City sent \$43,800 alone; the Washington, D.C. Post Office Department taxed their employees twenty-five cents out of their pay to send to the Howards.⁸² Provisions, clothing, and medical supplies came by railroad, along with letters of sympathy and incorrect advice for yellow fever treatment. Goods such as 1,500 quarts of champagne, 121 gallons of whiskey, and 288 cases of Budweiser were sent as well. Steamboats, railways, and Western Union Telegraph Company "surrendered its lines in the cause of humanity" to spread news across the country and deliver goods to the city.⁸³

Unequal Access to Relief Funds

The CRC's first act of yellow relief was to appeal to the War Department for military rations and A-tents so they could set up quarantine camps outside the city limits. CRC members hoped that by setting up these camps they could minimize contagion by quarantining the infected outside of Memphis. With the assistance of the Howard Association and the Catholic ministry,

⁸¹ *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 51 (1878), 936.

⁸² Keating, *History of Yellow Fever*, 115.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 128.

the Committee established four major camps, Camp Jo Williams, Camp Duffy, Camp Wright, and Camp Father Matthew, which sheltered and fed about 1,300 people during the epidemic. Analysis of who these camps helped and how they operated demonstrates how the Committee used relief efforts to discriminate against or sometimes even targeted the African American community.⁸⁴

Camp Jo Williams indicated how the Citizens' Relief Committee blatantly prioritized white native lives over black lives. The CRC chose to build this yellow fever camp four and half miles south of the city near the Missouri and Tennessee Railroad, because of "its isolated location, altitude, shade, ample springs of superior soft water, perfect drainage, and accessibility to rail communication."⁸⁵ The report was misleading—the area was not isolated but was instead an African American neighborhood. Local black residents feared the camp because they believed that living so close to the camp would bring yellow fever to their homes. Knowing they could not fight the camp's construction in the courts, the community was willing to use force to defend their homes. When the doctors and workers came to start construction, the African American men from the community picked up arms and drove them out of the area. Not to be outdone, the physicians returned the next day with two military companies. The community, outgunned and outmanned, had no choice but to stand down. Construction began the same day.

The neighborhood residents were right—the camp brought death to their doorsteps. In his *A History of the Yellow Fever*, Keating purposefully misrepresents Camp Jo Williams, claiming that "the remarkable and favorable feature of Camp Williams was that the disease did

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸⁵ Col. John F. Cameron, "XX. Camps; Depopulation of Memphis; Epidemics of 1878 and 1879." *Public Health Papers and Reports* 5 (1880), 152.

not spread among the inhabitants, nor did those who visited the camp from the surrounding country contract the disease.”⁸⁶ However, we know this is untrue. While there is no official record of how many local African Americans from that area caught the fever, a doctor from the camp noted that “colored families living within a few hundred yards of the hospital who have not visited the infected district at all and kept aloof from our camps, have sickened and died.”⁸⁷ This incident and others like it showed a clear disregard for black lives, a prevailing attitude in 1878 Memphis. The Committee sacrificed this African American neighborhood so they could distance the camp from the remaining white native population in the city.

White Memphians used various excuses to justify their harmful actions. Colonel John F. Cameron, part of the two militias at Camp Jo Williams, thought African Americans were not visiting the camp because of an uneducated fear of the doctor, rather than any anger and dismay at the camp’s presence in their neighborhood. Cameron believed that “negroes hold doctors and hospitals in great terror, and can rarely be induced to take medicine.” He spun tales of black ignorance, rather than confronting the possibility that the camp was not welcoming to the black community. According to Cameron, when sick African Americans were found and taken to the camp against their will, their families would sneak them out at night and let them die at home. He thought black Memphians would rather die than stay in the camp because they were so irrationally terrified of doctors. Though he admitted that some whites have similar fears about doctors, their “superior intelligence” allowed them to understand the dangers of infection.⁸⁸ This

⁸⁶ Keating, *A History of Yellow Fever*, 55.

⁸⁷ Dromgoole, *Dr. Dromgoole’s Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 52.

⁸⁸ Cameron, “XX. Camps; Depopulation of Memphis; Epidemics of 1878 and 1879,” 155.

was typical of the stereotypical or convenient excuses white Memphians used to justify why the Committee's public services were not being utilized by the black community.

Despite Cameron's expressed desire for local African Americans to use the camp, most of the white native community was not very concerned about African Americans' or immigrants' access to yellow fever relief services. In fact, it was often the tough and decisive behavior towards these communities that endeared the Citizens' Relief Committee to white Memphians who feared the specter of a race riot. Throughout the epidemic, Memphians wrote accounts about the fearful possibility of black mobs.⁸⁹ In his account of the yellow fever outbreak that was read throughout the country, Keating claimed that if not "for the Citizens' Relief Committee's officers, anarchy, confusion, robbery, arson, and murder would have prevailed to increase the burdens of a period, every hour which was frightened with special horrors, and that perhaps the city would have been destroyed." He highlighted the control of the CRC to ensure readers abroad that the city could keep order. His later example of this destructive and anarchistic force was a mob of African Americans from the countryside who gathered when the War Department rations arrived in the city.⁹⁰ According to Keating and the newspapers, a mob of thousands of hungry blacks menacingly surrounded the distribution depot, threatening to riot and steal if they were not immediately given food and supplies. It was supposedly only through the cunning wit of the military officers charged with distributing supplies that a riot was avoided and peace was restored.

Neither Keating nor the newspapers described in detail how this mob was supposedly averted other than the typical explanation of superior white intelligence triumphing over black

⁸⁹ Keating, *A History of Yellow Fever*, 110, 129. Dromgoole, *Dr Dromgoole's Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 61.

⁹⁰ Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878*, 129.

animalism. It furthered the image of African Americans as uncivilized and selfish, leeching the limited yellow fever resources from the calm and deserving remaining white population. Additionally, Keating and the media's use of the word "mob" is highly suspect. There was no mention of this incident in any city or military reports, where it would almost assuredly have been reported if the threat of a mob had indeed been so great. Therefore, it is more likely that a group of African Americans gathered to receive their rations, and the press, constantly fearful of a black insurrection, deemed them mob-like. By retelling this story, Keating and other media outlets assured the rest of the United States that Memphis could manage its black and immigrant populations during the epidemic. Upholding Memphis's reputation was important to the businessmen of the Committee who hoped to one day to restore the city's previously booming economy. This story about thwarting a black mob said that white Memphis maintained its power.

Keating then continued his defense of white supremacy by telling the story of a rich Memphian who let a white and black woman manage his private house. When the white woman fell ill, he sent the black woman a letter that said to "send the white woman to the hospital. Don't use any of the sweet milk; don't use any of the eggs or chickens, but help yourself outside." "Help yourself outside" meant that she should ask the Howards or the CRC for food, instead of eating his spoiling food. The woman faithfully did not take any of the wealthy man's food. Keating told this story to convey how powerfully white commands still rang in Memphis.

Another Memphis resident defended white supremacy during the epidemic. Dr. John Parham Dromgoole was a physician and wholesale dealer in patent medicines and perfumes. After attaining a degree from the University of Louisville School of Medicine in 1847, Dromgoole opened shop as a physician and retail druggist in downtown Memphis. He published

a collection of attributed and unattributed essays and reports called *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*. These reports covered the span of the epidemic, and talked about fever cures and the perspectives of both doctors and yellow fever victims. Some of the stories discuss race tensions in the city in varied and conflicting ways. One unnamed author wrote that:

as far as the blacks are concerned, they have nobly fought for their rations. But this must be said: they have behaved with a quiet patience characteristic of the race, deserving all praise. All the private residences, with all their valuable contents, of Memphis, from the beginning of the great plague have been in the sole charge of the blacks. Their fidelity to their trusts will never be forgotten. No race of people on earth were ever truer.⁹¹

This is one of the few printed passages in Dromgoole's history and the newspaper that recognizes the service of African Americans. However, the language reinforces the idea of white influence over black Memphians when it states black Memphians were true to white Memphians, some of whom were their former masters. The quiet patience infers quiet obedience and relays to readers that the remaining white population was able to control black Memphians and preserve white supremacy.

Conclusion

The Citizens' Relief Committee devoted significant energy to promote the image of Memphis as a city doing the best it could in a terrible situation. The businessmen on the CRC hoped that Memphis would return to economic normality if the rest of the country read about how the city efficiently organized city operations and yellow fever relief, as well as maintained white supremacy in a city that was suddenly mostly black. This publicity campaign also garnered donations from Americans who felt sympathetic to their plight.

⁹¹ Dromgoole, *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 64.

The promoted narrative printed in newspapers across the country rarely mentioned the 14,000 black Memphians who were left behind in the city. The CRC and the Howards largely ignored black Memphians both in yellow fever relief activities and in the media. The CRC also frequently made decisions that harmed the black community, like giving them an insignificant portion of the government rations and donated relief, and by putting deadly quarantine camps in black neighborhoods. These decisions prioritized the lives of the few remaining white Memphians over the many black Memphians.

Black Memphians only received attention in the media when the stories upheld the image that Memphis still operated under the yoke of white supremacy. The stories quelled both national and local worries about race riots by asserting that black Memphians were loyal to their white neighbors and would never betray them, or white Memphians were too smart and in control to let the African American population take control of the city. While the remaining white Memphians truly did fear losing control of the city, they reassured the world, in no uncertain terms, that they controlled Memphis.

Chapter III

A City Fractured

The summer of 1878 was a season of disease and chaos for the residents of Memphis. The yellow fever epidemic threatened to tear the social fabric of Memphis's racial hierarchy as an impromptu government struggled to maintain order in what had suddenly become an overwhelmingly black and immigrant city. Men like J.B.C., a white yellow fever aid worker from Camp Jo Williams, feared that the city's largely African American population could overthrow white Memphians' hegemonic political and economic power. In a letter later published in Dromgoole's *Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, J.B.C. wrote that sick African Americans were unwilling to work. Instead of leaving Memphis, he complained, they relied on War Department rations to survive. He feared that the city was one racially charged spark away from the black Memphians ransacking the city and stealing all the remaining yellow fever supplies. His proactive solution was to "establish martial law, build warehouses at points accessible to railroads, guard them, remove all the provisions from the city, and let starvation and disease do their legitimate work." In this near-apocalyptic world of yellow fever where families died in whole, the economy stalled, and starvation ran rampant, "there [was] no time for sentiment."⁹²

J.B.C.'s letter illustrates the ferocity of Memphis's racial tensions and the fear the remaining white native Memphians felt during the 1878 yellow fever epidemic. Not only did yellow fever threaten their lives, but it threatened the power structure that upheld their political

⁹² "Scenes in Memphis," *Indianapolis News* (Indianapolis, Indiana), September 10, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

and economic power and the image of racial order Memphis portrayed to the rest of the nation. To secure their political dominance, white Memphians mitigated racial tensions through limited political and economic concessions to the black and immigrant communities. This strategy worked in two ways: it prevented further racial strife and kept necessary city functions such as policing, sanitation, and cemeteries operating.

Black Memphians battled these genocidal racial sentiments when they participated in yellow fever relief. They hoped that they would earn the social esteem of their white neighbors by raising money and supplies, and working the dangerous jobs that kept the city operating and more people healthy. By the end of the epidemic, it was obvious that racial discord was too strong to overcome. Instead of acknowledging the black community's sacrifice and suffering, white Memphians perpetuated racial stereotypes. Newspapers portrayed African Americans as either lazy or riotous, and unwilling to help with relief efforts. They used these stereotypes to justify denying the significantly larger black community equal access to yellow fever relief.

Catholics also worked tirelessly to provide yellow fever relief to sick Memphians in an attempt to both help the city and gain social esteem from their peers. They also used the opportunity for the religious group, which faced national nativist sentiments, to gain social capital and prove their dedication to the Memphis community. They raised money and gathered supplies, went door to door to nurse the sick, and provided religious comfort to the dead and dying. They even worked alongside the CRC and the Howards. The CRC gave the Catholic organizations supplies when supplies were low in return for caring for Memphis's immigration population. The Howards even sent doctors and nurses to care for fallen priests and nuns.

The Catholic-based charities were more successful at earning the respect of white Memphians than African Americans. Newspapers portrayed Catholics as martyrs and heralded

their dedication to the sick. They even deemed Catholic priests as more faithful and devout than the protestant ministers who fled the city upon the fever's outbreak. The black community never received the same recognition for their efforts in yellow fever relief. Instead of being praised or rewarded with equal access to yellow fever relief, black Memphians either ignored or painted in stereotypical and degrading ways in the press.

Catholic Relief Participation

Catholic-based charity grew to be the third largest yellow fever relief operation in Memphis as Catholic priests and nuns came from across the region to nurse the sick and raise donations. Patrick A. Feehan, the Bishop of the Diocese of Nashville, oversaw Memphis's five Catholic churches: St. Mary's, St. Peter's, St. Patrick's, St. Joseph's, and St. Bridget's. When official word of the fever broke out, Tennessean priests gathered in his office and offered their services to attend to the sick and dying of Memphis. Feehan and his fellow priests understood that nursing yellow fever victims was a suicide mission, but they realized the epidemic could be an opportunity for the Catholic Church.⁹³ Tennessee's Catholics had many reasons to participate in Memphis's yellow fever relief, and many of the reasons were likely selfless and based on religious reasoning. However, like African Americans, they also participated to earn social capital. Tennessee's Catholics successfully earned the goodwill of Memphis's institutions and media sources by nursing the sick and helping the CRC and the Howards raise donations. By the end of the epidemic, newspapers rang with praise from Memphians and Howard doctors.⁹⁴

⁹³ Keith, *Fever Season*, 121-122.

⁹⁴ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, October 11, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

Like the African Americans, the Catholic Church faced nationwide prejudice. Nativism emerged as a political movement when immigration to the United States increased in the 1830s. The large influx of Catholic immigrants into the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century made some Americans question how the arrival of these new people would change the country. The Irish potato famine of the 1840s and the immigration of Eastern European Catholics later in the century created a diverse immigrant population who came from many different countries and spoke different languages. In the 1850s, Catholics accounted for only five percent of Americans. By 1910, they consisted of seventeen percent of the total population and were the largest religious group in the United States. This drastic increase spurred Nativist and pro-Protestant movements in many cities across the country.⁹⁵

Nativists believed that people of certain nationalities or religions could not become true Americans because they were too different, and their new ideas would erode the foundation of American ideals. Many did not think Catholics could assimilate because the authoritarian hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church clashed with the idea of American individualism. As immigration from Catholic countries like Ireland and Italy increased, Americans feared that these immigrants would be more loyal to the Pope than the federal government. Compared to other cities with a high immigrant population, Memphis's acceptance of Catholics seems atypical. Nativist sentiments were less extreme in Memphis, which had a longstanding history of predominately Irish immigration. Irish-born Memphians had already assimilated within the

⁹⁵ Julie Byrne, "Roman Catholics and Immigration in Nineteenth-Century America" *TeacherServe from the National Humanities Center*. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/nromcath.htm>. Accessed November 6, 2016.

community, took leadership roles in government, made up most of the police force, and established businesses.

The Catholic community's relationship with the Howard Association and the Citizens' Relief Committee was cooperative but independent. Though the priests largely served poor immigrants in Memphis, going door to door in the Irish district by the docks, they sometimes worked alongside the Howards by raising money and supplies or nursing in areas that the Howards could not reach. When the nursing clergy fell ill, the Howards would send nurses to care for them. The Howards also sent Catholic charities supplies such as bed, clothes, and food to sustain their nursing efforts.⁹⁶

While the Catholic organizations worked more closely with the Howards and the CRC than black charities, they were still expected to raise most of their funds and care for their own sick. The Catholic organizations operated largely independently and supplemented their supplies by appealing to other Catholics across the nation via newspapers and correspondence. Father Charles Parsons, a priest from St. Mary's Catholic Church, described his hope for a national outpouring of donations in a letter to his wife Margaret Britton Parson on August 20. He wrote that he was "appealing to my friends there [in the North] for help, I do not doubt that we shall see prompt and generous response for the whole country seems to be in sympathy with the rally in these times." The money raised funded Father Mathew Camp and other relief efforts.⁹⁷

The Catholic organizations' relief strategy was not totally unlike the CRC's decision to prioritize care for white Memphians. Catholic priests and nuns prioritized the lives of sick clergy

⁹⁶ Sisters St. Mary of the Third Order of St Francis (Roman Catholic) Correspondence, 1878", from Memphis/Shelby County Public Library & Information Center, *Yellow Fever Collection* (accessed March 10, 2016).

⁹⁷ "Letter from Charles Parsons to Margaret Britton Parsons, August 20, 1878," from Memphis/Shelby County Public Library & Information Center, *Yellow Fever Collection* (accessed March 10, 2016).

members over others. When the thirteen volunteer sisters first arrived from St. Louis to help the sick Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order of St. Francis in Memphis, they decided to “help the priests and Sisters first in their greatest need; then we should start in families.” They justified their priorities in a letter to their convent with a lesson taught to them by a Dr. Nugent: “Charity begins at home.” While they considered it very important to take care of the poor, it was even more important to take care of their own to whom they felt they owed the greatest debt. Additionally, if they could nurse the clergy back to health, then said clergy could continue to nurse with somewhat of an immunity.⁹⁸

The Catholic Church successfully bolstered their image and secured the goodwill of Memphis and many people throughout the country through their yellow fever relief activities. The Catholics’ earned a glowing reputation in national and local newspapers as priests and nuns died while visiting the dead. They were praised for their tireless nursing efforts and willingness to die on the front lines. The letters and diaries of the nuns at the Sisters of St. Mary’s said their sisters who fell sick “died in joyful resignation to the Holy Will of God, like saints, fortified with the last holy sacraments.” Accounts in personal letters and newspapers described even the healthy sisters as resolute, where “never a word of reproof or repugnance or homesickness escaped their lips. Their peaceful countenance showed obedience and resignation to the most holy will of God.” While their good works easily earned the Catholic priests and nuns a positive reputation amongst the poor Irish and native Memphians, their adopted language of martyrdom assured their saint-like legacy. When other Catholics or Memphians told the stories of these nuns and priests, they coopted this sacred-like language and printed the stories in newspapers

⁹⁸ “Sisters St. Mary of the Third Order of St Francis (Roman Catholic) Correspondence, 1878.” Doctors at the time believed people were more resistant to yellow fever if they caught it once and survived. Charles G. Fisher Letters. Mississippi Valley Collection (54-53 University of Memphis).

across the country. Protestant or Catholic, most of the country spoke in solidarity about the heroics of these men and women.⁹⁹

The newspapers' frequent comparison of dedicated Catholic priests to absentee Protestant preachers showed a growing respect for the Catholics and a disdain for religious leaders who fled Memphis. While many Protestant preachers participated in the mass exodus from Memphis, Catholic priests and nuns stayed to care for the sick and dying, often catching the fever themselves. The remaining people of Memphis noticed the Catholics' sacrifice and juxtaposed it with the flight of some Protestant ministers, which thus incited a commotion in the newspapers. Opinion pieces argued back and forth about the bravery of the Catholics and the supposed cowardice of the protestants. The September 20, 1878 edition of the *Memphis Daily Appeal* got heated when a man identified as Stephanus wrote an opinion piece that declared he scorned the thousands of ministers "as dishonest, cowardly, and a sham, those who stay away or desert, when helpless, suffering men, women, and children, reach forth feeble arm, and as in tears of pain for help."¹⁰⁰ The remaining white Memphians understood why people fled the city at the beginning of the epidemic, but they could not excuse the Protestant preachers, whom they saw as abandoning the city and their flocks during their most dire time of need.

An unnamed *Memphis Daily Appeal* editor, possibly avid protestant J. M. Keating, responded in the same issue in defense of the protestant ministers and said, "while a few of those have disgraced themselves by fleeing the fever and leaving their charges to the mercy of god, to find spiritual consolation wherever they might, most of them in Memphis have stood to their posts and have sealed their devotion in death or in long sieges of the plague, a few only having

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 20, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

escaped.” The author argued that only two protestant ministers had fled, a Dr. White and Mr. Gee. The rest had stayed faithfully at their posts to help the sick, often becoming sick themselves, bringing the economy to a halt.¹⁰¹

It was important for Memphis’s newspaper to assure the rest of the country that their religious figures stayed in the city because it showed that important institutions like churches were still operating and people of faith still had confidence in Memphis. The mass exodus of religious figures would make it look like the situation in Memphis was so dire it almost was not worth saving. Additionally, church figures were supposed to be the best type of Memphians. If they were selfish enough to leave, it could lead readers across the country wondering about the morality of the average Memphian.

The Catholics of New Orleans responded to the debate in the *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*. The article smugly claimed that, “a Protestant minister is not bound to sacrifice himself for his flock: he did not take vows to that effect on the day of his ordination, and his first duty as a man and father, is to himself and family.” The article further stated that a minister cannot be accused of desertion when his tasks to “read a little, pray a little, and sermonize a little” could be performed by anyone, and offer little help to the dead.¹⁰² Essentially, the article argued that Protestant ministers could not provide the same relief as priest because without last confession and absolution, Protestant ministers could not hand the dying over to their creator.

Maintaining White Control in a Black City

¹⁰¹ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 20, 1878. America’s Historic Newspapers.

¹⁰² *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, September 8, 1878. America’s Historic Newspapers.

The demographic shift in Memphis at the onset of fever created opportunities for African Americans that they had been previously denied. The Citizens' Relief Committee, afraid that the significantly larger African American community would rebel against the few whites who remained and governed the city, granted limited political and economic opportunities to black Memphians. This strategy worked well for the CRC in two ways. First, it kept necessary city functions such as sanitation, policing, and grave burials operating. It also offered concessions to the frustrated African American population and helped to soothe racial tensions. The CRC's actions were largely empty gestures and indicated little long-term progress. Black ward representatives had little power and black Memphians were the only people remaining in the city who were willing to do the possibly deadly work of policing the city and burying diseased bodies. After the epidemic passed, most of these economic and political opportunities disappeared.

Black Memphians took these dangerous jobs in hopes that they would gain social esteem from their white peers. They hoped that assisting in yellow fever relief and providing suffering white Memphians proper burials would show that they are also an important part of the Memphis community. Unfortunately, the racist ideals of the late-19th century were too prevalent to overcome. White Memphians failed to recognize the contributions and sacrifices of the black community. Newspapers rarely mentioned their suffering or their participation in relief activities, and when they are mentioned, they usually perpetuated racial stereotypes and described them as moblike. This silence allowed the CRC to unfairly distribute the yellow relief rations and donations to the white population and give black Memphians very little to help them survive the summer.

With a mostly African American city population, the Citizens' Relief Committee feared Memphis' black community would revolt against the small remaining white population. The CRC realized they needed to incorporate African Americans into the governing system to some degree to maintain white political power. The Committee named black men as city ward representatives in a move that both relieved CRC of the responsibility of caring for black Memphians and appeased the black community, thereby mitigating the chances of a political uprising from the African American community. The process was not democratic; the Committee chose the ward representatives rather than the African American community. While this was certainly an unusual event for the black community, the underlying truth was that the black representatives were subordinates of the white committee members and had little political power. The Committee charged the ward representatives with reporting neighborhood problems and needs but their reports rarely stirred the Committee to act upon the ward representatives' advice. The lack of action taken on behalf of these reports shows how superficial African American representation truly was.¹⁰³

In addition to ward representation, the Committee had to expand the African American community's economic opportunities to keep basic city operations functional. The Committee recruited African Americans to the badly depleted police force. This was major for a community never before represented on the police force before 1878 epidemic and had frequently been abused by Irish policemen. By making black Memphians police officers, the Committee gained black support, which they saw as important to maintaining the racial status quo in the city.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878*, 112.

¹⁰⁴ Dennis C. Rousey, "Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly" *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (Aug. 1985), 357-361.

It also solved the Committee's problem of restoring the city's policemen—no white Memphians wanted the job.¹⁰⁵ Being a policeman during the epidemic was extremely dangerous to an individual's personal health. Not only were they responsible for maintain law and order, they were also sanitary officers, charged with spraying the streets with fever-suppressing disinfectant and burning infected items. Such interaction with yellow fever victims and their personal effects led to a high contagion rate. Keating described their bravery as, "one by one [police officers] fell, dying at their posts; yet those who remained were always ready, with their comrades..., to protect and save the lives and property of their fellow-citizens." He continued further to favorably describe Memphis's police officers but never mentions their race. Creating a black police force was not uncommon in other cities during epidemics but it was viewed as a sign of a struggling city. Memphis looked more stable to the rest of the observing country if their police force was white. And in a barely post-Reconstruction world, it was likely that Keating's readers assumed that whites risked their lives as policemen, implicitly denying African American men credit.¹⁰⁶

By necessity, the Committee also hired African Americans as grave diggers during the epidemic. Working in cemeteries and coming in such close and constant contact with diseased corpses and sick loved ones made this job extremely undesirable to most white Memphians. Nineteenth century ideals about funerals would typically prevent black men from burying white people, but only African Americans and immigrants were willing to do it. Black Memphians formed a substantial portion of the Citizens' Relief Committee's hastily organized burial cops.¹⁰⁷ The Victorian habit for extravagant funerals vanished in yellow fever's onslaught of death as the

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 357-361.

¹⁰⁶ Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878*, 112.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

Committee authorized burial certificates for bodies that African Americans would bury at premium pay. Without pomp and circumstance, black cemetery workers buried plain wood coffins as quickly as possible in open trenches.¹⁰⁸

African Americans agreed to this difficult work for more than financial gain. Much like the CRC trying to maintain or improve Memphis's image, African Americans hoped that by participating in such a sentimental act and treating the diseased with respect, they could gain social esteem from white Memphians. When Mrs. Ben K. Pullen's family brought her body to Elmwood Cemetery around 5:15 p.m., the white supervisor told the black gravediggers that if they worked past 6:00 p.m. they would not be paid. In Keating's description, "the negroes, more humane than he, and indignant at such an exhibition of brutality before the husband and children, standing beside all that remained to them of a good wife and mother, replied that sometimes they worked for friendship," and continued burying Mrs. Pullen, despite their supervisor's protestations and threats.¹⁰⁹ This shows that African Americans were not simply pawns manipulated by the Citizens' Relief Committee with a few shallow concessions. They understood their place within the new city government and local economy. However, moments like Mrs. Pullen's burial gave African American men the chance to earn the respect of white Memphians. They hoped that by showing kindness to the bereaved, they could one day receive similar empathy.

Keating likely wrote about this incident to highlight a moment of racial harmony in the city. The black gravediggers helping the white family could be construed as a sign of deference. Readers could interpret the action as African Americans still serving their former masters and

¹⁰⁸ Keith, *Fever Season*, 155-156.

¹⁰⁹ Keating, *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878*, 194.

caring for the white man. Preserving the racial hierarchy was an important part of preserving Memphis's image

In addition to receiving little praise for their participation in relief activities, African Americans also received very few of the rations and charity distributed by the Citizens' Relief Committee and the Howards. When Captain Macabe's force gathered on 37 South Court Street to distributed rations per the Committee's orders, they issued a total of 10,150 rations to 364 white families. They then gave the African American families, which comprised of 80% of Memphis's demographic, only 300 rations, or less than 3%. These small rations were not nearly enough to care for all of Memphis's African American citizens.¹¹⁰ The Howards treated African Americans no better. Langstaff, the president of the Howards, once exclaimed in frustration that he "could get no food for [his] nurses. Our men are falling every day, and if we do not drive these lazy [black] people out of town not one of us will be left."¹¹¹ Langstaff and the other Howards saw black Memphians as an obstacle to caring for white Memphians. He thought the African Americans were lazy, and therefore unworthy of the donated relief he wanted to distribute to the truly deserving, like his nurses and sick white people.

Since yellow fever relief was distributed unequally along color lines, the African American communities had to join together to help one another and survive the epidemic. Black churches and fraternal organizations gathered and distributed relief, and the Colored Sisters of Zion, from Zion Methodist Episcopal Church on Gayoso Street, offered their aid to the black relief committee. On September 3, a group of Memphis's black ministers, including Reverend William Brinkley of Pleasant Garden Baptist Church and Reverend Mansfield of Collins Chapel

¹¹⁰ *Public Ledger*, September 4, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

¹¹¹ Dromgoole, *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever: Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 61.

C.M.E. Church formed the Colored Preachers' Aid Society. Like the Howards, the Colored Preachers' Relief Society appealed to black communities throughout the country in advertisements published in both black and white newspapers, like *St. Paul's Daily Globe*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Rock Island Argus*, and *The Public Ledger*. Their widely-printed plea read:

Our people are suffering, dying, and destitute. For Heaven's sake, relieve us all you can by sending us means! We are not able to bury our dead, or to nurse and feed the sick and destitute. The most of us have no employment, as all business is suspended. Send us contributions of money or provisions speedily.¹¹²

African American communities across the country answered the call for aid and gave what they could, like the poor black farmers from Kansas who collected \$275 during a benefit concert in September.¹¹³

It is difficult to know how much money the Colored Preachers' Relief Society gathered through donations because their records are not accessible and newspaper accounts and contemporary observations typically only offered white perspectives about the epidemic. The lack of media attention African American Memphians received indicates that most whites did not notice African Americans' sacrifices for the relief effort. Recognizing the African Americans struggle would acknowledge the exclusivity of the Citizens' Relief Committee's relief distribution. The Committee and the media instead promoted an image of the lazy, do nothing black Memphian to excuse not giving the black community enough rations to survive.¹¹⁴

African American's complaints were rarely heard in the newspapers because the city's main newspapers worked in cooperation with the Citizens' Relief Committee to spread

¹¹² *Public Ledger*, September 4, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

¹¹³ Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 169.

¹¹⁴ Deanne Stephens Nuwer, *Plague Among the Magnolias: The 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Mississippi* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 71-72.

consistent the message to the rest of the country that Memphis was under control. Instead of acknowledging how charity was distributed, *The Avalanche* described Langstaff “as energetic, as clear headed a worker as ever steered so great a lifeboat among the shipwrecked.”¹¹⁵ Langstaff and the rest of the Howards were likely seen as “a lifeboat” for the many Memphians they helped but they, in cooperation with the Committee, prioritized the relief distribution to white native Memphians. As *The Avalanche* quote indicates, his direction of the Howards pleased the Committee and the Memphians they represented.

Keating and the newspapers constantly praised the Citizens’ Relief Committee and the Howards. The newspapers were also important in highlighting the plight of the remaining white Memphians so they could appeal to national sympathies and draw more aid. In contrast, the trials of African Americans were rarely mentioned. The city’s institutions, inarguably prejudiced against its black citizens, rarely said explicitly negative things about African Americans because they were afraid of exasperating racial tensions in a primarily black city.

When African Americans were mentioned, there was a noticeable difference in how Keating and others described the white and black populations. In Keating’s descriptions, all sick white men stayed peacefully in their beds while most of the white men who were healthy “were engaged in the work of relief, either as physicians, nurses, as Howard visitors, or as members of other organizations which did such noble service.” In contrast, Keating described a chaotic scene to his readers where “at midday a noisy multitude of negros broke in upon the awful monotony of death, the dying, and the dead, clamoring for his dole of the bounty which saved the city from plunder and the torch.”¹¹⁶ These two stories are very different. Keating’s white men

¹¹⁵ *Avalanche*, September 1, 1878. America’s Historic Newspapers.

¹¹⁶ Keating, *History of Yellow Fever*, 111.

were dignified and acted as energetic participants in the relief effort. He styled African Americans as almost riotous animals, willing to burn down Memphis if they did not receive their rations. It was not until they got their share of the rations that the black Memphians returned to their isolated homes. This was a continuation of the common Reconstruction trope that the newly freed blacks were government leeches, unwilling to do any work now that they were not under the forced direction of their white masters.

An account from *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever: Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878* expresses a similar theme. The unidentified author complained that the "Negroes will not work, will not leave town, but lie about and draw rations, and then get sick and become a burden intolerable. The fields are white with cotton, but not a foot will they move. They give the sick no care, and seem to think they must be fed in idleness and nursed with greatest care."¹¹⁷ The author of this passage thinks black Memphians do not deserve rations because they are not helping with the relief efforts or picking the cotton in the fields.

Another author in Dromgoole complains about how the fields are filled with cotton that black Memphians could pick for money but that they instead line up for rations. He depicts the crowd gathered for rations, composed of mostly African Americans, "as sad and sickening sight." The sight of so many black Memphians also invokes the threat of violence as the author bemoans that white men have to endanger their lives to hand out rations to these black people. He did not describe the crowd of waiting people doing anything particularly hostile but the sight of so many black bodies is enough to instill fear of violence and chaos. Additionally, this anonymous and presumably white man says, "the blacks will not leave the city and work in the

¹¹⁷ Dromgoole, *Dr. Dromgoole's Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 61.

fields so long as they can obtain free rations, and the whites have not the heart to drive them out.”¹¹⁸ The author perpetuated the idea that black Memphians were lazy and not contributing to relief efforts, totally ignoring African Americans’ services as police officers and gravediggers. Lastly, the idea that black Memphians are in the city only because “the whites have not the heart to drive them out” implies two things. First, it insinuates the remaining white population is generous and allowing African Americans to remain in the city out of the kindness of the hearts. It ignores the realities of the epidemic. Black Memphians made up 80% of the city; leaving would be very difficult and it would also break quarantine laws. Further, it would effectively halt many of the necessary fever relief activities black Memphians were doing, like burials and policing. Second, removing them would likely be very violent. Even if the white population could remove them, it would likely look like a reenactment of the 1866 massacre that the city was so thoroughly shamed for. This would completely derail the CRC’s mission of upholding the image of white supremacy and their control over the city.

This is another example of ruling whites’ blatant refusal to recognize the situation and contributions of black Memphians. The author’s claim that African Americans did not participate in relief efforts is categorically untrue. The argument that they could be working in the cotton fields appears in the sources several times but it is unreasonable. The cotton fields were owned by wealthy white Memphians who were frustrated that they were earning little to no money during the epidemic. Many of these people had left the city, so they could not pay anybody who picked the cotton. Further, people typically stayed inside to avoid contact with

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1878, 63-64.

yellow fever victims. Black Memphians likely did not want to work in the fields because they were afraid of catching the fever, like white Memphians.

Black Memphians' perceived riotous behavior and unwillingness to help with yellow fever relief efforts served as justification for the Howards and the CRC to ignore the needs of the black population. If African Americans did not help relief efforts, then they did not deserve fair access to doctors and rations. The historical evidence proves that African Americans greatly helped in relief efforts and without their aid, basic city functions like burying the dead and sanitizing and policing the streets, would have halted from lack of manpower. This did not matter though because the CRC controlled the narrative. The operating newspapers worked with the CRC to exclude black relief efforts, effectively excluding them from the national supply of donated relief and preventing them from earning national good will.

The CRC also used the newspapers to insidiously prioritize the suffering of the white population over the black population. White sick people were depicted as martyrs and Keating often printed stories of brave parents sacrificing themselves for their children. For example, Keating told the heartbreaking story of a mother whose entire family died. After they were buried, she

turned away from her griefs with a brave heart, sustained by a holy trust, to nurse the sick. Her losses and trials deepened her sympathies and enabled her to appreciate the disheartened, almost demented condition of those yet in the valley of the shadow, through which she passed. She entered the sickroom with the confidence of a martyr and dispensed the holy and comforting assurances of a saint. There was almost healing in her touch.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Keating, *History of Yellow Fever*, 110.

White women were depicted with incredibly grace and selflessness. These articles affirmed white femininity and celebrated the love of a mother. Once this mother lost her children, all sick people became like her children as she tried to nurse them back to health without any care about whether she lived or died. Keating has other descriptions of brave mothers, like “another woman [who] heroically nursed and buried her husband and three children, and then lay down—a walking case—and, as she said, gladly welcomed death.” There were also particularly heart wrenching descriptions of mothers nursing babies until they die, only to be found later with the baby glued to the mothers’ breasts.¹²⁰

These descriptions are tied together by the idea that the white women laid down their lives trying to save their family. If they were unable, they happily died in order to be reunited in the afterlife. Keating and the newspapers grant these women a dignified death that upholds the tenets of white femininity. These stories were likely calculated to induce sympathies from readers across the country, who would then donate money and supplies. Keating and the newspapers do not grant black women the same courtesy. A story about an African American woman whose body “was found back of the *Memphis Daily Appeal* office in an outhouse, defaced beyond recognition, and half the body eaten by rats, hundreds of which were lying dead near by.”¹²¹ This horrifying description of a black woman does not grant the grace and dignity given to white women. Plus, its frequent publication indicates a grotesque fascination with the discomposure of this woman’s body. It would be distasteful to print this if it were a white body but it is okay because it is a black woman, whom people did not think had the same delicate femininity as white femininity.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

There are other, less extreme examples of this contrast between black and white femininity. Like the story above, newspapers rarely depicted black women as feminine or as martyrs. They are typically portrayed as beggars, calling the white men they asked money from “massa.”¹²² These stories further the idea of the lazy African American and highlighted the idea that black people relied on whites for help, thus indicating their superiority. When news stories talked about black mothers, it was usually with pity. Their bodies are again commented upon and deemed as less feminine. Dromgoole tells the story of a Howard worker who found “a colored woman, with blood-shot eyes, disheveled hair, and grief-stricken appearance, [who] asked, ‘Would massa be so good as to send the funeral man; her two children were dead and her husband would soon follow.’” When the man followed her to her home that would make “even the bravest heart flutter,” he saw her family, half naked, lying on pallets in filth.¹²³

Juxtaposing these two stories shows the disparity between how the newspapers and books talked about white and black women. Black women’s bodies were open to critique and death did not excuse them from their slovenly appearance. The articles are also careful to note that the black women call the white men “massa,” thus reinforcing the idea of white superiority.

In addition to negative or absent media coverage on African Americans, the Howards and the Citizens’ Relief Committee also justified their prejudiced distribution of aid by creating biological and situational reasons as to why African Americans did not need any help. The Committee utilized the popular scientific argument that African Americans were immune to yellow fever because “the fever attacks the nervous system, and the negro constitution being less refined than the white, is less subject to an attack.” This argument justified how the Committee

¹²² Keating, *The History of Yellow Fever*, 62-63.

¹²³ Dromgoole, *Dr. Dromgoole’s Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878*, 63

spent most of the relief aid on white Memphians, though is unlikely the members of the Committee truly believed this claim as they watched thousands of black Memphians die from yellow fever. The newspapers even printed the city's daily death total, dividing the sum in "white" and "colored."

This pseudo-biological argument was feigned ignorance at the plight of black Memphians but it was common throughout the South. The white residents from Grenada described their plight to a Washington, DC newspaper and said they were surprised that yellow fever killed African Americans because "old inhabitants say they never saw it kill a pure Ethiopian before."¹²⁴ Meanwhile, other newspapers accounts of the neighboring town of Grenada describe "negroes dropping down like sheep and will not help each other" with a "horrible and sickening appearance, while the sounds of their delirious voices vibrates through the streets of the almost deserted village."¹²⁵ Obviously, the citizens of Grenada and Memphis saw black suffering and knew that African Americans were susceptible to the disease. They simply did not care about their suffering and instead blamed African Americans' misery on their own ineptitude.

Conclusion

Memphis's minority groups used to the epidemic to try to earn the goodwill of the white population by participating in relief efforts. The Catholic Church successfully battled nativist sentiments and earned national praise by risking the lives of its clergy when they nursed Memphis's sick immigrant population. Newspapers highlighted the bravery of the clergy and described them as martyrs for the city. This martyred image granted the Catholics more

¹²⁴ "Dislocated Grenada. The Situation Terrible in the Extreme. The Death Rate Increasing," *Critic-Record*, August 21, 1878. America's Historic Newspapers.

¹²⁵ "Yellow Fever. The Scourge Still Active in the South," *New York Herald*, August 22, 1878, 3. America's Historic Newspapers.

sympathy, and therefore, more access to aid. African Americans were less successful. The CRC expanded their political and economic options by allowing them to become ward representatives, grave diggers, and police officers but they received very little praise from the CRC or in newspapers. Newspapers rarely mentioned their suffering or their participation in relief activities, and when they are mentioned, they were usually furthered racial stereotypes. Newspapers called violent, lazy, government leeches, transmitters of yellow fever, and accused them of not helping with fever relief activities.

The negative media coverage of black Memphians allowed the CRC and the cooperating Howards to unfairly distribute the yellow fever relief rations and donations to the white population and give black Memphians very little to help them survive the summer. The unbalanced access to yellow fever relief along color lines spurred communities to create their own relief and care for themselves. The Catholics succeeded because of their extensive network. African Americans limped through the epidemic, accumulating loss, and gained little respect or no permanent economic or civil rights.

Epilogue

A City No More

Yellow fever destroyed the Costillo family. The once wealthy family tried to escape the city too late and Mary Costillo's mother and father fell caught yellow fever. Her mother survived but her father died within the week. The death of Mary's father, the family's primary breadwinner, plummeted the Costillo family into economic hardship. Mary's mother gathered the family and broke quarantine to escape the city and spend the rest of the summer with relatives in Chicago and helped manage a boarding house until they could return. After the fever passed in October 1878, the family traveled down the Mississippi River to Memphis and were horrified by what remained of their town: "oh, how desolate and forlorn was poor Memphis! Nearly everyone was in mourning. Half of the business houses were closed. Strange priests and ministers in all the churches. Eastern women, nurses, and clerks, and the town filled with strangers." Her mother tried to make life work in this strange new Memphis but their economic situation worsened when the life insurance of Mary's father ran out. As her family's sole provider, Mary's mother rented out rooms in her home to strangers to make some money.¹²⁶

After struggling for a few months to provide for her family, Mary's mother moved herself and the children to Denver, Colorado and joined the silver boom.¹²⁷ Like many others, the Costillo family never returned to Memphis. Memphis became so badly depopulated it lost its city charter. The CRC's mission to preserve Memphis's reputation failed. After decades of reputation management and promoting a positive image of Memphis, the 1878 yellow fever

¹²⁶ "Mary Costillo Nickolds Scrapbook," *Mary Costillo Nickolds Memoir Collection*, 1941 September, 1941, University of Memphis Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections., 94-97.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

epidemic finally confirmed Memphis's reputation as a dirty city where one went to die. This drove away both old and new businesses, and confined the local economy to the cotton industry.

As Memphians slowly returned to the city, they blamed the terrible epidemic on the city's horrible sanitation failures. Of the 19,600 citizens who stayed in the city during the epidemic, 70% of the population contracted yellow fever and 5,150 died.¹²⁸ Memphians castigated their city leaders for decades of shelving health reforms just because it would have temporarily restricted the city's commercial activity. The 1878 epidemic finally convinced the city government and business leaders that the financial cost of the epidemic outweighed the cost of necessary sanitation reforms. They realized it was time for a change in strategy. Instead of promoting stories that Memphis was a clean and healthy place to do business, city leaders set out on a mission to prove it. For the next two decades, business leaders directed sanitary reform efforts to clean up Memphis and reestablish economic development.

Business leaders led sanitation reform because Memphians lost confidence in officials from the pre-epidemic government, many of whom fled at the start of fever and were slow to return. The existing government proved its incompetence in the decade before the fever with failed, short-sighted, and half-hearted sanitation measures like the Nicholson pavement in 1868 and their unwillingness to install sewer systems. Instead of returning to the government that existed before the CRC, the city instead chose to revoke its city charter and become under the direct supervision of the state at the end of 1878. On February 8, 1879, the Tennessee state

¹²⁸ Evans, "The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 and Public Health Reform in Memphis," 4-5.

legislature created the new Taxing District of Shelby County, an entity of the state led by prominent businessmen appointed by state politicians.¹²⁹

In addition to turning Memphis into a tax district, the Tennessee legislature organized a permanent Board of Health in Memphis that had to power to create strong health reforms. They had such authority that they regulated “everything, in fact, that can nearly or remotely affect the public health.” They could build new buildings, cisterns, privies, and sewers, monitor the water supply, and regulate food and medicine. They could also conduct city inspections and issue fines.¹³⁰

Local merchants and cotton traders, desperate to restore Memphis’s booming economy, joined local health reform efforts and created the Auxiliary Sanitary Association (ASA) in May 1879. The ASA organized at the Cotton Exchange and the Chamber of Commerce with the mission to “assist local authorities in the improvement of the sanitary condition of the city.”¹³¹ They bought disinfectants, garbage carts, and mules for the Board of Health, and publicly shamed Memphians who had unsanitary properties. They hoped their efforts would show the rest of the country that Memphis was finally taking the health of the city seriously. Then people would invest in the city again and business activity could resume.¹³²

Yellow fever struck again during the summer of 1879, but this time the city was better prepared. Like the previous epidemic, the first recorded death sent Memphians scattering out of the city, but this time it was a local, state, and national effort to control the epidemic. On June

¹²⁹ G.B. Thornton, “The Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis, 1879,” *American Public Health Association Reports* 5 (1879), 117.

¹³⁰ Keating, *History of the Yellow Fever*, 282.

¹³¹ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 22, 1879. America’s Historic Newspapers.

¹³² Evans, “The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 and Public Health Reform in Memphis,” 22.

11, the Tennessee Board of Health quarantined the city and made local physicians inspectors on the railway lines. Local officials collected garbage and cleaned the streets with disinfectants. The National Board of Health financed the efforts and provided state and local officials with advice. The 1879 outbreak killed 485 out of the 1,532 people who fell sick and confirmed fears that Memphis would continue to be haunted by visitations of yellow fever. It reiterated the threat and confirmed the need for public health improvements to prevent more outbreaks.¹³³

Memphis's business leaders continued to promote their new intensive public health reforms well into the twentieth century and eventually rehabilitated their reputation as a sickly city. The Board of Health continued to pursue sanitation improvements over the next few decades. Most importantly, they expanded the existing four miles of sewer lines to 152 miles by 1900, which eliminated soil saturation and pollution and kept the Bayou cleaner. This and other reforms greatly improved Memphis's mortality rate, which went from 35 death per 1,000 citizens annually in the pre-epidemic years to 23.8 per 1,000 in 1886.¹³⁴ With help of these sanitary reforms, Memphis rebounded and became a thriving economy. In 1893, Memphis was again granted a city charter by the state government, and by 1900, Memphis was Tennessee's largest city.

While Memphis had finally tackled the necessary sanitation reforms to keep its citizens healthy and overcome its negative reputation as a dirty town, racial tensions continued to haunt the city. The 1878 yellow fever epidemic seriously changed the city's demographics leading into the twentieth century. Only a percentage of the 27,000 people who fled the city upon fever outbreak returned and continued to live in the city. There were also less immigrants in the city

¹³³ *ibid.*, 22-23.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, 34.

because some left upon outbreak and many others died from fever. With less immigrants in the city, the Catholic Church lost some influence. Though they had gained prominence in the city during the epidemic for their relief activities, their congregation shrank as Irish and Italian Catholics left the city.

Memphis's government continued to work with black Memphians when convenient over the next two decades but still refused to grant permanent economic and civic rights. By the beginning of 1879, African Americans comprised almost half of the city's total population. This put black Memphians on a hazardous trajectory for the next few decades. Some achieved economic success and continued to work jobs previously denied to them before the epidemic. Others served in minor political roles. These successes were largely short-term and were rolled back in the 1880s and 1890s. Further, white resentment towards black success continued to build and broke out into violent aggressions like the 1892 lynching of the Peoples Grocery workers.

The epidemic presented financial opportunities for some African Americans. The CRC appointed black Memphians to the police force during the epidemic and African American policemen continued to serve throughout the 1880s. Historian Dennis Rousey argues that white politicians used them as "visible tokens to gain and hold political support from the black community" at a time of great demographic change. However, by the late 1880s, the increasing exclusion of African Americans at the polls made black police officers a liability rather than an asset to white leaders. Further, as the city embarked on sanitation reforms, epidemics became fewer and less deadly. White Memphis did not need black Memphians to help maintain order

during the epidemics anymore. By 1889, black police officers were eliminated from the force and black Memphians lost access to an important city institution.¹³⁵

A few prosperous black Memphians had the opportunity to capitalize financially on the 1878 epidemic. Robert Reed Church, the black saloon owner who was attacked and shot during the 1866 Memphis massacre, saw the epidemic as a financial opportunity. The permanent exodus of white and immigrant Memphians flooded the real estate market with a lot of cheap, available property. After the epidemic, people had difficulty selling their homes and businesses for even a tenth of what they were worth. The 1878 epidemic destroyed what little confidence many had in Memphis and simply wanted to leave before the next epidemic came. Church “became the laughing stock of some very wise business people, because he invested every penny he had saved in real estate which was being offered at a bargain. And bargains there were a plenty during the yellow fever epidemic!”¹³⁶ He believed Memphis would embark on the necessary sanitation reforms for the city to become prosperous again. “Isn’t it called the Bluff City?” Church asked when people questioned his financial decisions.

That’s just what it is...It’s built on a bluff. The reason why Memphis has epidemics of yellow fever is because the streets are in such terrible condition. They are now paved with blocks of wood which quickly rot, and these big holes filled with great pools of stagnant water breeding disease. When Memphis is cleaned up and the streets are properly paved by honest officials, there won’t be any yellow fever and it will be one of the healthiest and desirable cities in this country.¹³⁷

Church saw his prediction come true as Memphis embarked on genuine sanitation reform and his investments became profitable. He became an important figure for the black community in Memphis. He made several failed attempts to enter Memphis politics, and in 1899 bought a tract

¹³⁵ Rousey, “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis,” 361.

¹³⁶ Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 69.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

of land on Beale Street to build Church's Park and Auditorium, the first major urban recreation center in the United States owned by an African American.

Despite some advancements for black Memphians after the 1878 epidemic, black success was met with hostility. Lynching was not uncommon in Memphis, like many places throughout the South. The 1892 lynching of three Memphis grocers is most well-known for its association with Ida B. Wells, a journalist, former Memphis school teacher, and crusader against lynching. Ted Moss, owner of the Peoples Grocery, and his two friends, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart, were arrested for defending themselves against an attack on Moss' store. The grocery store was very successful in the neighborhood, which caused a white competitor to become jealous. He hired off-duty deputy sheriffs to destroy the store and shut Moss down. The three men tried to defend themselves against the attack, unaware the men were deputies, and a gun battle broke out. Several of the deputies were wounded and Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were arrested. Several nights later, a mob of white men gathered outside the jail, dragged the men from their cells to a deserted railroad yard, and shot them to death.

Much like the 1866 Memphis Massacre, white Memphis responded to black economic success with violence and again, faced another image problem. Memphis finally fixed its sanitation problem but race would continue to haunt the city throughout the next century as city officials continued to grant shallow economic and political concessions when convenient but resented black success. The government could not maintain social order in a diverse city so hostile to African Americans, but it did not affect Memphis's reputation like the 1866 Massacre. National readers no longer worried about the Memphis's black community like they did before. Ida B. Wells tried to capture America's attention to draw outrage over the 1892 lynching but

could not find an audience. In the end, the country cared more about Memphis being clean than peaceful.

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