



Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia in the 1850s, with the Naval Hospital in the right corner foreground and the Gosport Navy Yard across the River in the background to the left.

THE UNITED STATES NAVY'S RESPONSE TO THE 1855 YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC

To maritime cities in the 18th and 19th centuries, the specter of yellow fever always hung over them. In 1855, the deadly virus hit the United States hard in two locations. The first city struck by the disease was New Orleans, Louisiana, where the outbreak has since become a model for public health officials on how not to handle a public health emergency.

The second location was southeast Virginia, specifically the cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk. One medical historian rightfully called this outbreak the “other case,” as the rural towns in Virginia were not as high profile as a large city like New Orleans. The

total number of deaths in Virginia was not as high as those in New Orleans but, nonetheless, the per capita casualty rate was similar and the stories just as horrific. One difference between the two locations is that Hampton Roads’ cities had the resources of the United States Navy to help mitigate the emergency. The Department of the Navy’s active duty officers and Sailors and the civilian workforce came through during one of the worst crises ever to hit the region. Like today, the Navy had a major presence in Hampton Roads. In 1855 workers at the Gosport Navy Yard were busy constructing the two

magnificent steam frigates *USS Colorado* and *Roanoke*; ships of the Home Squadron called the area its homeport; and the newly established Naval Hospital in Portsmouth was up and running.

It was during this time of progress and innovation that the steamer *Ben Franklin* arrived in Hampton Roads from the island of Saint Thomas. In June 1855, *Ben Franklin*'s captain decided to make port in Portsmouth to have the ship's boiler fixed. Yellow fever had hit the region in years past, albeit, not as severely. Just a year before, for example, a French frigate made an emergency stop in Hampton Roads due to a major outbreak on the ship. They requested the U.S. Navy medical staff for assistance. As a result of the French frigate's



This 1851 map gives a better idea of the make-up of the two port cities during the time of the epidemic. The United States Naval Hospital is in the bottom left corner with its sprawling acreage. The Gosport Navy Yard is in the top right corner with three dry docks and over thirty structures. The Shipyard was downstream to the south of where the Naval Hospital was built.



The top of the 1851 map also depicted the grand front entrance to the Gosport Naval Shipyard.

emergency stop, public health officials now inspected all ships, military and civilian, in a special quarantine area on the Elizabeth River. Officials boarded *Ben Franklin* three times, questioned the captain, and searched the ship for signs of sick individuals. Despite the fact that the ship had come from the island of Saint Thomas, a major hotspot for yellow fever, the ship was cleared for docking. Unknown to the officials, *Ben Franklin's* captain had hid members of his ship's company who were showing yellow fever symptoms.

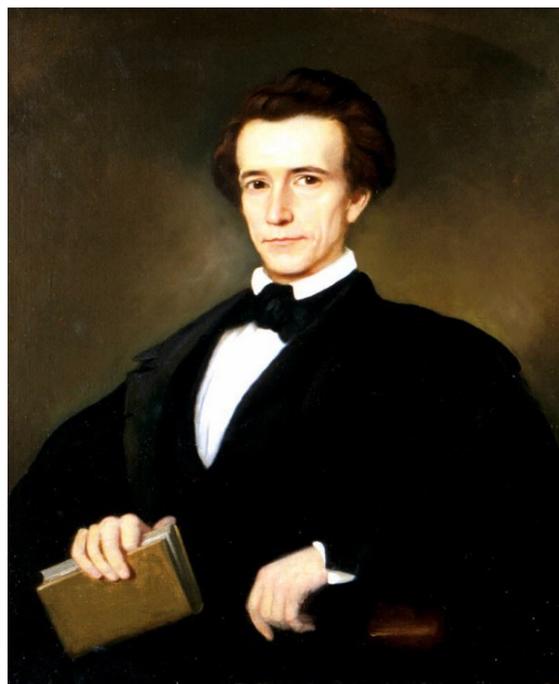
The "scourge" and "the destroyer," among the many names authors labeled the virus, spread quickly. By mid-July, civilian doctors in the cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk reported that several hundred patients had yellowish-colored skin and vomited black or coffee-colored bile. Dozens of people were dying every day. With the cities' medical system totally overwhelmed, the Common Council of Portsmouth appealed to the U.S. Navy for help.

At the time of the outbreak, the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth only had three doctors, with Dr. Lewis Minor as the chief medical officer. Already trying to mitigate an outbreak among Sailors aboard the receiving ship *USS Pennsylvania* and within the Navy Yard, both located near *Ben Franklin*, Dr. Minor willingly opened the doors of the Naval Hospital to civilian patients. Naval doctors were sometimes called off-site to diagnose living and dead patients. In one case, a Navy doctor, possibly Dr. Minor, had to take the extraordinary steps to prove to the public the danger of the outbreak was real. He held the nostril of a corpse and pushed on its chest. Black bile gushed out of the corpse's mouth, much to the horror of the witnesses.

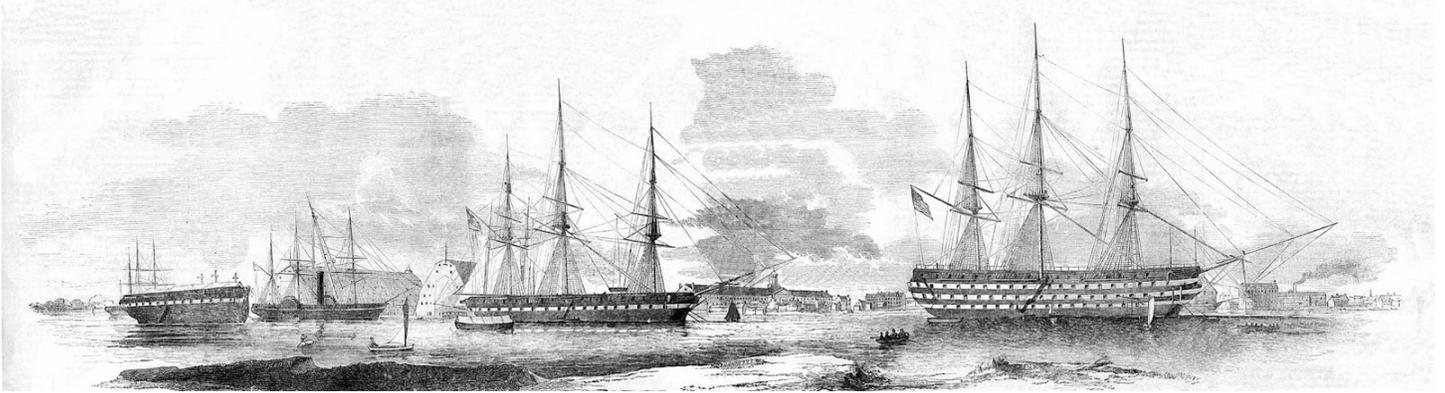
Upon hearing about the dire situation, Secretary of the Navy James Dobbin sent reinforcements by reassigning several Naval surgeons from other cities to Portsmouth. Local assistance came from nuns from the Sisters of Charity. Over the next few weeks, Dr. Minor and his staff took in over 500 patients, including 98 children. Even with the addition



Photographic portrait of Dr. Lewis Minor,
Chief Medical Officer



Portrait of James C. Dobbin
Secretary of the Navy (1853-1857)



USS *Savannah*, *Princeton*, *Powhatan*, *Columbia*, and *Pennsylvania* docked at Gosport Naval Shipyard, 1853.

of the Naval Hospital, there were still not enough beds for patients. People were dying faster than they could be buried. Approximately 70 to 100 people were dying from yellow fever every day. At the Naval Hospital alone, 40% of the patients who showed symptoms died. This percentage included several of the medical staff and one Naval chaplain.

Further reinforcement came in the form of officers, Sailors, and civilian workers from the Gosport Shipyard. Despite the mass exodus of civilians from the region, most of the Navy Yard's staff stayed at their posts and joined Naval Hospital staff by aiding the sick the best way they could. For example, the Yard's mechanics stopped working on ship machinery and built temporary hospitals throughout the region. To help alleviate the issue of needing space to house and bury the dead, the Yard's carpenters stopped working on ships and built coffins while the general labor force buried the dead. One of the Shipyard's architects, Mr. Hartt, was singled out for his bravery. An eyewitness later said that Hartt "passed through the thickest of the fight, leading any who dared follow, attending to the living and burying the dead, day or night." Naval medical staff treated patients all summer and into the fall when the first frost finally helped to curtail the plague.

Shortly after the last yellow fever patient was treated, Secretary Dobbin wrote directly to Dr. Minor to praise the surgeon and his staff. The Secretary stated that the Department "expresses its appreciation" for the surgeon's "self-sacrificing and unflinching spirit." Dr. Minor humbly refused to accept the direct praise and

passed it onto the people working for him. He wrote, "It is impossible to express fully the high estimate in which I hold the conduct of the gentlemen who have served with me during the epidemic. So admirable has been their conduct that I cannot distinguish them individually. In the fullest sense of the expression, they have done their duty." The citizens of Portsmouth showed equal appreciation and in turn they awarded specially commissioned gold medals to Dr. Minor and five members of his staff with an engraving of the Naval Hospital's image on it.



The Portsmouth citizens' medal awarded to Dr. Minor and his staff.

In the years immediately after the yellow fever epidemic, the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery studied the 1855 outbreak for clues as to what caused it and why it was so severe. Their report, along with civilian doctors'

investigations, concluded that the *Ben Franklin* brought the disease to the region. They also concluded that another agent was transmitting the disease through the air and spreading it to humans. Reports like these helped medical professionals in the following years conclude that mosquitoes and poor public hygiene were the culprit.

Best Available Image

St.	Names.	Age.	Rate.	Place.	1855.	1855.	1855.
277	Charles Taylor.	23.	Marine	Canada	Yellow fever.	Aug 25.	Sept 6. 1855.
278	Edward Raymond.	22.	"	"	"	"	Sept 1. 1855.
279	Patrick Johnson.	21.	Sea	Ordinary	"	"	28 "
280	William Johnston.	16.	Apprentice	Canada	"	"	Sept 1. 1855.
281	Henry Greenfield.	54.	"	"	"	26.	Aug 29. 1855.
282	William Donelan.	19.	Apprentice	Canada	"	27.	Sept 7. 1855.
283	Joseph Forbes.	18.	Marine	Canada	"	29.	Sept 5. 1855.
284	William Thompson.	30.	"	"	"	"	"
285	Scott Spence.	41.	"	"	"	"	Oct 1. 1855.
286	Robert Butler.	25.	"	"	"	30.	Sept 1. 1855.
287	Joseph Woodman.	22.	"	"	"	"	Sept 1. 1855.
288	Michael Kelly.	23.	"	"	"	Sept 1.	Sept 1. 1855.
289	J. C. Walsh.	47.	Marine	"	"	"	Sept 26. 1855.
290	J. M. Chisholm.	25.	Marine	"	"	2.	Sept 25. 1855.
291	Damon Williams.	57.	"	"	"	"	Sept 6. 1855.
292	John Brown.	52.	"	"	"	"	Sept 5. 1855.
293	Gen. Morgan.	22.	"	"	"	3.	Sept 21. 1855.
294	Dr. B. Brown.	22.	"	"	"	"	Sept 7. 1855.
295	R. H. Montgomery.	20.	"	"	"	"	6.
296	George Wagner.	20.	"	"	"	"	Sept 21. 1855.
297	Ed. S. Atkins.	34.	"	"	"	4.	Sept 1. 1855.
298	John McCann.	32.	"	"	"	"	Sept 28. 1855.
299	George K. Cooper.	"	Marine	Canada	"	5.	Sept 8. 1855.
300	John Holden.	25.	Marine	Canada	"	6.	Sept 10. 1855.
301	William Littleton.	34.	"	"	"	"	11.
302	William Garret.	23.	"	"	"	7.	Sept 28. 1855.
303	Patrick Sullivan.	33.	"	"	"	"	Sept 28. 1855.
304	John O'Connor.	24.	"	"	"	"	Sept 28. 1855.
305	Abraham Kupper.	22.	Marine	"	"	8.	Sept 31. 1855.
306	Stephen Davis.	56.	Sea	Ordinary	"	10.	"
307	Samuel Wilson.	27.	Land	"	"	10.	Sept 1. 1855.
308	Henry Ludwig.	38.	Marine	Canada	"	"	Sept 25. 1855.
309	John Montague.	36.	Marine	"	"	"	Sept 1. 1855.
310	Thaddeus H. Donelan.	29.	"	"	"	11.	Sept 21. 1855.
311	Thomas Thorgan.	35.	Land	Ordinary	"	12.	"
312	Edward Howard.	25.	Sea	Ordinary	"	"	"
313	Admond Mackay.	36.	"	Canada	"	"	"
314	William Young.	36.	Sea	"	"	"	Sept 27. 1855.
315	Charles Weeks.	19.	Land	Ordinary	"	14.	Sept 21. 1855.
316	Rich Coffey.	40.	"	Canada	"	15.	"
317	Michael Joyce.	24.	Marine	Canada	"	"	Sept 26. 1855.
318	Edw. C. Pittman.	"	Marine	Canada	"	"	Sept 29. 1855.
319	John Dickson.	27.	Marine	Canada	"	18.	Oct 1. 1855.

Gosport Naval Hospital Patient Register, August and September 1855. The total deaths of 18 and the total discharges of 25 show that the chance of survival was slim.