

“The Plague Ship:”  
Examining the Arrival and Controversial Quarantine of the J.W. Taylor at  
The Port of New York in 1899

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When Dr. Havelburg, Assistant Surgeon in the United States Marine Hospital Service, accepted his new assignment in October 1899, it is hard to imagine he did not feel at least some measure of fear in regard to what he was about to undertake. Although the bubonic plague had resurfaced in the 1860's and by the end of the century spread throughout China and India, Havelburg had now been tasked to investigate rumors that the plague had appeared half way around the globe, on the South American Continent. As he traveled to Brazil, perhaps he thought of the previous plague pandemics which shaped so much of human history. Whether it was the Byzantine Emperor Justinian escaping the disease with his life, only to see 50 million people in his empire and beyond die at its hands; whether it was the estimated 60 percent of the European population that died due to the disease in the Middle Ages; or whether it was the thousands of people who had already died in India and China, it was after all, in part, up to Havelburg to prevent this outbreak from being as catastrophic as the previous two. Yet Dr. Havelburg was not working alone, he was an agent of the United States Marine Hospital Service and reported directly back to the Surgeon General Walter Wyman. Founded in 1789 to provide healthcare and funding for Marine Hospitals and servicemen in the United States Navy, the Marine Hospital Service's function was expanded under the National Quarantine act of 1878 making it one of the first nationally oriented public health organizations in the United States. As the U.S.M.H.S. would eventually become the current Public Health Service (PHS), by the year 1899, it was already the predominant organization in the United States working to prevent the spread of disease.

Yet, the turn of the century saw the disease manifest itself in new ways and neither Havelburg, the M.H.S., or any other public health organization were able to prevent the third global pandemic of bubonic plague in human history. While the death toll in the United states

remained relatively low by comparison—despite notable outbreaks in San Francisco and the recently-annexed Hawaiian Islands—the entire world was forced to combat the historically devastating disease in new locations and with new techniques. Due to the increasingly global and industrialized world economy, both the spread and containment of disease became not only harder to monitor, but increasingly required cooperation between different groups of health-related officials. As in much of human history, port cities in 1899, with their chaotic nature and high traffic, were natural hotbeds for disease and Santos, Brazil was no exception. As Havelburg arrived by steamer to accomplish his mission, he would soon learn that so too had the plague.

Despite the fact that Brazilian officials had declared the presence of plague in Santos a week earlier, Havelburg's initial report from October 25 was hesitant. After studying the reports of many of the local physicians and officials, he eventually telegraphed "On further investigation I find the official reports are unreliable. From information received I should say think you had better wait further information."<sup>i</sup> By the time his next report arrived at the M.H.S. on December 14, there would be no doubt regarding the plague at Santos, and Havelburg would find himself caught up in the midst of a national controversy.

On October 18, 1899, the same day that the municipal government of Santos officially confirmed the presence of plague in their city, Robert Hope was discharged from the local hospital in Santos. When he arrived in Santos on the steamship the J.W. Taylor only a few days earlier, he had been involuntary admitted to the hospital by Dr. Moura Ribeiro who feared Hope might be sick with plague. Dr. Ribeiro, held three medical positions: he was the visiting doctor of Robert Hope's employer, the shipping agents Lamport & Holt; he was the managing physician at the municipal hospital; and he was a member of the local sanitary commission investigating the possible outbreak of bubonic plague in Santos. Whether Ribeiro's insistence that Hope be

hospitalized was due to genuine concern, to his own personal interest, or rather to some combination of the two, the timing of Hope's discharge was ironic as it would not be long before he was truly sick.

In order to receive hospital leave, Hope initially reported to Lamport & Holt that he was suffering from syphilis, however after his discharge the next week, Ribeiro's notes would instead detail the presence of eczema on Hope's face and lips. Regardless of what ailed Robert Hope on his arrival in Santos, on October 18, 1899, he was deemed healthy enough to return to work. Six days later he re-boarded the J.W. Taylor and set sail for New York City. Serving as the steamship's steward, Hope's duties consisted of maintaining and operating the living and dining quarters for the captain and crew.

On November 2, when Hope began to experience pain in his head, legs and back, Captain Waters and the ship's cook, realized immediately that he was seriously ill.<sup>1</sup> The pair were left with little to do but nurse the young Englishman after he developed a fever the following day and even after they had utilized "the full extent of the onboard medicine cupboard"<sup>ii</sup>, Hope's condition continued to worsen. As Hope was rendered immobile with exhaustion, headache, and fever, his groin and underarms began to swell, resulting in the ominous buboes characteristic of "the black death." On November 7, Robert Hope died and was buried at sea. Within two weeks, millions of Americans would read about Hope's death. His name would appear on the front pages of newspapers in Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco and New York and many medical professionals would argue about the circumstances surrounding his death.

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<sup>1</sup> The cook of The J.W. Taylor is consistently referred to by different names in different accounts. The two most common names are Robert Burns and Charles J. Allison.

Hope, however, would not be the only subject central to the controversy that his death would create. The day after his burial, both the cook and Captain Waters began to exhibit similar symptoms and upon reaching the New York Harbor on November 18, the J.W. Taylor presented the yellow flag to indicate the need for quarantine. Despite the many physicians and officials there that day to meet the Taylor, as well as the many plans they had drawn up for similar scenarios, the presence of the Taylor in the New York Harbor over the next month would challenge numerous assumptions about the practice and ideology of public health at the turn of the century. In particular, the infamous steamship would provide basis for which to discuss the standards and procedures by which the rapidly developing field of public health would operate.

Additionally, not all of those waiting for the arrival of the Taylor were medical professionals. Journalists were also waiting at the harbor that day and would continue to be present at nearly every significant turn in the Taylor's story. Consequentially, they would greatly affect both the contemporary understanding of the ship's presence in the New York Harbor as well as the greater historical legacy of the resulting controversy. Ultimately, the importance and influence of this reporting would highlight the changing structures of public health in a world where both information and commercial goods were circulating at an ever-increasing pace. Moreover, this ongoing construction of the Taylor's narrative would indicate a larger conversation surrounding the tensions and limitations of existing public health systems, particularly when opinions held by the general public clashed with the opinions of medical professionals.

On November 18, a small contingent of medical officials sailed to meet the newly-arrived J.W. Taylor. Due to Havelburg's reports of the plague in Santos, health and quarantine officials across the United States were notably suspicious of travelers and cargo from Brazil. When Dr.

L'Hommedieu, the health officer on duty at the Port of New York, saw the yellow quarantine flag on the ship from Santos, a part of him must have felt a moment of terror considering the legacy of death and destruction that potentially floated in front of him. To further complicate Dr. L'Hommedieu's situation, he was not the ranking medical official at the Port of New York. His boss, Dr. A.H. Doty, Health Officer of the New York Port, was in Europe.

Although reports differ in competing papers, L'Hommedieu was met on the ships deck by Captain Waters. Some reports suggest Waters was in a great deal of pain while others suggest Waters had already passed the most severe part of his illness. Reported in The New York Journal, after being informed of his necessary detention due to suspected plague, the brave Captain gritted his teeth and spoke through the pain, "Yes, I know all about it. I have it now myself and the steward died of it on the way north."<sup>iii</sup> Regardless of the veracity of this scene, unanimously reported was L'Hommedieu's inspection of both the cook and captain. On each of them he discovered the same ominous symptoms that had afflicted Robert Hope, pronounced swelling of the glands in the legs and armpits. With evidence suggesting what he perhaps expected, and certainly feared, L'Hommedieu promptly declared an official quarantine of the J.W. Taylor. He dared not risk with the lives of New York City's three and a half million people.

The initial quarantine that L'Hommedieu declared could be most basically understood as three straightforward steps that had previously been prepared by his absent boss, Dr. Doty. First, the confirmation of disease by an outside source; second, the detention of the diseased persons and crew; and third, the disinfection of the ship. To confirm the infection of Waters and the cook, Doctors Lawrence and Park from the New York Board of Health arrived at the Taylor later that afternoon. The two physicians extracted samples from the suspected sailors and using

hypodermic needles to aspirate their lymph nodes, they drew fluid from the many swollen buboes.

The samples were immediately sent to the laboratory in order to confirm the presence of plague bacillus while the two infected sailors, having been re-examined, were subsequently transported to Swinburne Island. One of two small artificial islands built off of the eastern coast of Staten Island, Swinburne had been created in the late nineteenth century as a specific quarantine facility for people suffering from contagious diseases. The other island, Hoffman Island, would later be the destination for the other sixteen crew members who were required to stay at a detention center for the duration of eight days in order to make sure they did not develop symptoms similar to those of their cook and captain. The Taylor itself was to later be subjected to a rigorous 3-day fumigation consisting of steam, sulphur and mercury.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Dr. L'Hommedieu would initiate the final part of the official quarantine protocol by assembling an advisory board that the ranking health officer—Dr. Doty—had appointed several years earlier. Consisting of some of New York's leading physicians, the board would gather as a means of internally reviewing, conducting and advising on the quarantine. As L'Hommedieu and Doty's second in command, Dr. E.B. Sanborn, reported on the morning's findings to the advisory board, a statement was soon issued from the group. The statement read, "In reference to the cases of bubonic plague said to be present at quarantine station, the nature of the disease seems to be established by the history of the cases and the evidence that the plague exists at Santos. Under the circumstances the committee deems it wise to provide for the removal of the sick to Swinburne Island and the well to Hoffman Island, and the discharge of the cargo

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<sup>2</sup> Information of the quarantine protocol is taken from Geddings report to the M.H.S.

Geddings, H. D. "Plague on the Steamship J. W. Taylor at New York Quarantine." *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 14, no. 49 (1899):

under the strictest sanitary precautions, while the ship itself shall be held in quarantine. In the opinion of the committee there is absolutely no reason for alarm.”<sup>iv</sup> Despite the measured and consistent tone struck in the statement, one member of the advisory commission was noticeably less satisfied with the precautions set into place that day.

Dr. John B. Cosby, of the New York Board of Health separately addressed the gathered the reporters at the end of the advisory meeting and in turn, expressed several much stronger opinions about the ship’s quarantine. Cosby began his statement by explaining the process of examining bacteria samples to the gathered reporters. Optimistically stating the samples would prove to be decisive by the following day, Cosby further explained that the quarantined crew members would be detained at Hoffman Island for the duration of the plague’s incubation period, roughly eight to ten days. But Cosby’s accommodating tone soon took a noticeable turn. Whether pressured by reporters, expressing his personal beliefs, or attempting to project the power and confidence of his position, Cosby went on to stress that although the Taylor’s cargo may be allowed to be landed under the quarantine protocol, the ship itself would by no means be allowed to enter the port. Making his position even more explicit he stressed the city would be protected “no matter what the cost,” going so far as to suggest the possibility of burning the Taylor’s cargo.<sup>v</sup> Evidenced by the high number of articles that would include Cosby’s comments the next day, reporters distinctly employed the doctor’s interview as means of adding drama to the comparatively restrained statement of the advisory committee. As the James W. Wadsworth, a tugboat designed to steam and fumigate quarantined vessels, sailed out to the New York Harbor that night to begin its work, newspapers across the country were finalizing their edits and printing the next day’s issues, many of which had the J.W. Taylor on the front page.



The headlines shared a common thread: the element of fear. The Los Angeles Times read “DREAD BUBONIC PLAGUE.” Similar was the Chicago Daily Tribune: “PLAGUE IS IN NEW YORK,” and finally The New York Times which read: “FEAR THE PLAGUE IS HERE.” Oddly, one of the more inflammatory articles from November 19, was published with one of the least sensational headlines. “BUBONIC PLAGUE STOPPED AT NEW YORK’S GATE” was printed in bold capital letters in the upper left-hand corner of William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal and Advertiser, making it the lead article of that day. A paper that would come to be emblematic of the sensational Yellow Journalism of the period, The New York Journal also offered the most detailed report of the Taylor’s arrival that day. Containing many details unique to its own report— such as the dramatic first encounter between L’Hommedieu and Captain Waters—The New York Journal also printed, in bold, a portion of Cosby’s strong statement that followed the advisory meeting. The statement reads, “But after the ship is released from quarantine, she comes under the jurisdiction of the municipal health authorities. You may state to the public that under no circumstances will this ship be allowed to land, or to approach a dock of New York City. I intend that the people of this city shall be protected. That is the paramount duty, and it will be performed, whether the cost is two dollars or two million dollars. If it is considered necessary the ship will be burned.” He continued, “The British medical authorities in India since the outbreak of the plague there have burned villages and towns as the only certain way of destroying the germs of the disease. I want the newspapers to tell the people that we honestly believe there is absolutely no danger that the disease will get into New York. And I repeat no matter what the cost, no matter what measures may be necessary, the people will be protected. If there are no precedents to guide our action then we will make precedents.”<sup>vi</sup>

Cosby's statement was, without a doubt, afforded the most editorial significance in the article, as it effectively acted as the piece's conclusion. Compared to another lengthy report from The New York Times, a reader of the Journal could easily have assumed that Cosby, in fact, was in charge of the quarantine process. Moreover, the report in The New York Times seemed to stress the actions of a different health official, the temporarily absent Dr. A.H. Doty, Health Officer of the Port of New York. In noticeable contrast to The New York Journal, The Times led their article by emphasizing the immense preparation that the quarantine protocol represented, stressing that the actions being taken to quarantine the Taylor had been determined years in advance by quarantine and harbor officials, all experts in their field. Although including a much-reduced version of Cosby's quotes, The Times article concluded with a segment recounting Dr. Doty's previous scholarship regarding plague and quarantine. Hailing it as extensive and carefully planned, a clear impression was given that Doty was the architect of a thorough and careful quarantine, specifically calculated for this exact moment.<sup>vii</sup> The sentiment was shared by the Chicago Daily Tribune, which offered another of the more extensive reports. Similarly focused on Doty's scholarship and preparedness, the Nov. 19 article prominently displayed the full statement of the advisory committee concluding with the optimistic statement of New York Physician M. J. Lewis. Stating, "The public need not be alarmed. Watchfulness is necessary and the excellent quarantine methods in vogue in this country will stop the disease. The appearance of the disease in this harbor, will however be a warning to the health officials at every port of entry in the country and it is not probable the disease will obtain a foothold here."<sup>viii</sup> History would sadly prove Dr. Lewis wrong as the plague would indeed reach the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century notably ravaging poor immigrant communities in San Francisco. Nevertheless, Lewis's statement reflects both the growing confidence and evolving significance

of the American public health structures of the period, sentiments that are further visible in the preparation of Dr. Doty's quarantine protocol and the New York Times complementary support of his strategy.

At all events, by the end of the J.W. Taylor's second day in the Harbor of New York, the entire country was aware of its presence, knew the names of the crew members and perhaps most importantly, generally understood the process of their quarantine. Although citizens from all corners of society would undoubtedly hold their own discussions as to the appropriate quarantine of the Taylor, perceptible readers in New York would notice similar debates beginning to form in much more public channels as well. The noticeable difference in reporting by the New York Times and the New York Journal in particular, illustrated a small yet potentially significant question as to the authority and very nature of the quarantine: was it to progress according to the structurally oriented, bureaucratic plans of A.H. Doty? Or was it to be subject to judgment and procedure of a more unilateral nature, through the authorities of the Board of Health? Reports on the following day reiterated what was at stake in the way this question would be answered.

The next day on Nov. 20, the presence of plague bacteria in the crew was confirmed and reported in nearly every national paper. Although the samples taken by Dr. Park contained currently dead bacteria, the bacteriologist clarified that it was quite possible for the bacteria to contaminate other areas of the ship, and even become active again in certain conditions. As this scientific proof underscored the veritable threat that the Taylor and the bubonic plague posed to the city, newspapers proceeded to contextualize this information in different ways. The Times chose an international approach, detailing the spread of plague in Latin America with specific focus on Santos. Recounting the investigations of Assistant Surgeon Havelburg, the article reported the spread of the plague, from Portugal to Rio de Janeiro and finally Santos. The Los

Angeles Times described for its readers the specific stages of disinfection that lay ahead for the Taylor. Explaining the corroboration process of the bacteriological exam, the article detailed the process by which the cargo was to be gradually offloaded, disinfected and finally landed. Finally, the article returned to the position of Health Commissioner Cosby, who again stated that regardless of the quarantine procedures, the Taylor was not to be allowed into the New York Harbor under any circumstances due to his fear that rats would escape the ship and spread the disease. Considering this, the headline found in The New York Journal which read “Rats on the Plague Ship Must Be Destroyed” can, characteristically, be viewed as an endorsement of Cosby’s claims.

The Journal article itself focused solely on Cosby’s comments, affording only one mention of the disinfection process near the conclusion. The article also marks the first use of the sensational re-naming of the J.W. Taylor as “The Plague Ship.” A term which would be consistently used to reference the Taylor from that moment forward. Yet for many, the danger posed by “The Plague Ship,” likely seemed difficult to equate with the many reports coming from Swinburne Island. Dr. Sanborn, who had made a personal visit to the quarantine hospital just the day before, was happy to find both Captain Waters and the cook walking about the facility in high spirits. In fact, even in the very same article which christened the J.W. Taylor as “The Plague Ship,” The New York Journal could not refrain from reporting Captain Waters “promenade” around the facility, noting that even the cook could not refrain from joining this demonstration of good health. Evident in this article is a shift in in the narrative of the J.W. Taylor. As the disinfection began and the ill crew members began to show signs of improvement, the heart of the issue soon became about something new altogether. The focus had been shifted to the cargo—consisting of unroasted coffee beans—as it potentially posed the greatest

remaining threat to the city. Yet it quickly became apparent to many people that in some ways, quarantining cargo could be more complicated than quarantining people.

The most immediate difference between quarantining the two subjects is the space required. Similar to the dire consequences of hospitals or other medical facilities becoming over-crowded, in the case of the Taylor, considerable danger laid in the chance the quarantine area would become over-crowded. The next day on November 21, a German steamer, the Taormina arrived from Rio de Janeiro, a city also suffering from an outbreak of the plague. It too was subject to the extensive quarantine process Doty had devised. Considering plague existed and was spread on a bacteriological level, not only did the physical surfaces of these ships need to be disinfected, but so too did the crews clothing and any other textiles or materials that could potentially support the bacteria. Most significantly for the sake of the Taylor's quarantine process, this required the bags that held the coffee itself to be burned. In total, there were 44,613 bags of coffee on the Taylor, a number that regardless of the weight of the bag, would require immense work and caution to complete.<sup>ix</sup> In order to accomplish this, the coffee was first to be unloaded upon a series of lighters, or small barges, that would remain with the Taylor in quarantine. Although the unroasted coffee beans themselves were not viewed as risk of contamination, as a precautionary measure the beans were exposed to the open air as means of disinfection, receiving “open air and sunlight by day” and in the cold November nights, temperatures close to freezing.<sup>x</sup> While empty, the large cargo hold of the ship was to be subjected to sulphur fumigations daily. Finally, the living apartments, cabin and forecastle were all cleaned with Sulphur and a “corrosive sublimate solution” while the ship’s bedding, clothes and all textiles were subjected to steam disinfection. After the several days, it took to complete

the disinfecting process, the ship and lighters were to be left guarded and anchored outside of the New York Harbor for at least eight to ten days as to outlast the incubation period of the disease.

Despite the extensive measures taken to disinfect the ship, ultimately neither Doty or any other health officials would have any certain way of knowing if the sum of the disinfection techniques had worked. As Doty and the other health officers of the port were attempting to prevent the spread of arguably the most dangerous and feared diseases known to mankind, even the slightest lingering doubt in the minds of the quarantine officials or the public could prove to cause serious panic. Such doubts were on full display on the front page of the New York Journal the following day.

On Nov. 21, the same day the Taormina arrived and was quarantined, the ideological lines that had subtly divided the coverage of the J.W. Taylor between The New York Times and The New York Journal exploded into possibly their most blatant difference in reporting yet. Far from the headlines on the 7<sup>th</sup> page, The Times ran small article titled “No Fear of Bubonic Plague.” Printing the statements of Quarantine Official Dr. L’Hommeadieu regarding the quick recovery of both Captain Waters and the cook, the short article reported their recovery and good health, interpreting that the dead plague bacteria found in both crew members indicated that the plague had run its course. Conversely, jumping out from the opinion page of The New York Journal were the large block letters which read “Burn That Coffee.” The editorial argued that the entire cargo of the Taylor should be burned in order to eliminate any trace of the disease without a doubt. Suggesting that Doty’s policy of burning only the bags themselves was nowhere near safe enough, the piece presented an economic argument that the value of the coffee would be a small price to pay for any amount of greater damage caused by the plague. Citing the calculated millions of dollars that England had spent combating the plague in India in recent years, the

piece further concludes that the value of the lost coffee should be reimbursed by the public, as it would be considered a part of the price of protecting the greater population. The editorial concluded with the biting remarks, “If the coffee is allowed to be landed it will be mixed with the general stock in the market, and nobody will know when he may be having some of it on his table. Most people do not care to drink coffee from plague ships, however thoroughly it may have been fumigated. If there are any officials who feel differently, let them supply their own tables from the hold of the J.W. Taylor as a guarantee of good faith.”<sup>xi</sup> As the official in question was certainly a reference to Dr. Doty, the completely contradicting tones struck by the two New York papers on that day begin to highlight the many growing complexities in the quarantine of the Taylor.

Although the Journal article certainly takes aim at Doty and thus, the process and structures of the quarantine, the editorial also tellingly strikes a populist tone, which places the collective good of the city over any business, bureaucratic, or private interests that would have been influencing the quarantine. But with its populist sentiment, how did The Journal expect to change the quarantine process, making sure that at all the costs, the ship would be prevented from entering the harbor? The answer appeared in an article published on the next day, Nov. 22 with the subheading “Health Board has Sharp Eyes on the J. W. Taylor.”

The president of the New York Board of Health was Michael C. Murphy, a figure who likely was likely known by a large part of the city population due to his long career in service to the state of New York. Fighting with the several New York Infantries in the Civil War, he received the Medal of Honor for his valor shown at the Battle of The North Anna River in 1863. After the war, Murphy served terms in both the New York State Assembly followed by terms in the New York State Senate as well. In 1898, Mayor Robert van Wyck appointed Murphy to the

post of President of the Board of Health where he remained until 1902 when he then assumed the first ever position as New York Police Commissioner. On the matter of the Taylor, Murphy, who was not a doctor— “civilians” were customarily appointed to lead the Board of Health—offered an opinion very similar to his colleague from the quarantine advisory committee, Dr. John Cosby, who was The Journal’s first featured voice for outspoken commentary. President Murphy expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed quarantine procedures and reiterated the prevailing line coming from the Board of Health: that they were prepared “to take whatever action necessary” to protect New York from “the plague ship.” Murphy’s involvement in the quarantine not only began the most controversial chapter of the ship’s stay outside of the New York Harbor but further corresponds to a crucial time in the Taylor’s story. As the disinfection of the cabins and main rooms of the ship had been completed by the sanitation tug Wadsworth in the previous days, the coffee had not begun its transfer to lighters and neither had the healthy crew been transferred to Hoffmann Island. Further explained in The Journal’s latest article, was the new proposal by Dr. Sanborn, the current ranking member of the Port of New York’s quarantine officials in the absence of Dr. Doty, to disinfect the steamers cargo by steam, rather than continue with the process of offloading it to lighters. The Journal attributed this change in protocol to inquiries by the coffee’s buyers as to when they were to receive the products they had already advanced money for. Although the article insisted those who purchased the coffee were banks, the actual purchaser of the coffee was the Arbuckle Brothers company, an early leader in the industry of roasting, grinding, and selling pre-packaged coffee. Nevertheless, the Journal was reasonable in assuming Sanborn’s proposal was likely connected in some part to pressure from Arbuckle Brothers to either receive their coffee or to make sure that the product was not spoiled in the process of the quarantine. Ultimately then, this moment provided a notable moment in the



quarantine of the Taylor, which saw new external pressures emerge both through the populist sentiments of Murphy and the Board of Health as well as the pressure of private business as expressed by the pressure from Arbuckle Brothers as well as Dr. Sanborn's reconsideration of protocol.

Several days would pass without news of the Taylor. On Nov. 24 a small summary in The Journal would again emphasize Murphy's position of denying the Taylor within the New York Harbor. Yet, later that day, the unloading of the coffee would commence, signaling the continuation of the quarantine and the decision of Sanborn to follow Doty's original plan despite pressure from the private sector. The following day, The Times would similarly run a small article detailing the involvement of the Marine Hospital Service and their evaluation of the quarantine. In a fashion consistent with past Times reports, the article would optimistically suggest that the Taylor would be permitted to land within the next week, allowing for the offloading of its coffee. The Board of Health responded with one its fiercest rebuttals yet, coordinating a joint statement with officials from New Jersey County Board of Health, the Hoboken Board of Health and officials from Perth Amboy and Bayonne, New Jersey, all echoing Murphy's statement that the J.W. Taylor would not be allowed to land at their respective ports.<sup>xii</sup> Their statements were printed next to a printed and hand-drawn portrait of Murphy in the Nov. 27 issue of The Journal. Notable was the manner in which the many statements from the surrounding health boards were aligned against various supporters of Doty with a clear partisan distinction. Returning to the "breakfast table analogy," and in obvious refute of a statement made in an earlier Journal editorial "Burn that Coffee," a supporter of Doty enthusiastically claimed, "I should not hesitate about having any of that coffee served at my own breakfast table."<sup>xiii</sup>

Later that day, another ship would arrive from Santos, The Roman Prince, which after it had been summarily detained for disinfection, brought the count of quarantined vessels anchored outside of the New York Harbor to three. As ships were expected to offload their cargo using lighters similar to the Taylor, Doty, having that day returned from Europe, surely saw the impending complications of continuing the quarantine indefinitely and sought to progress through more official means. As an ex-member of the Board of Health himself, Doty submitted to the Board for review a report that argued the Taylor should be permitted to land once the quarantine had concluded. Noticeable in the sponsorship of this report was Dr. Henry Geddings of the Marine Hospital Service. Having arrived in the days prior to report on the ship for the Surgeon General, he added to this support in his own official report which was delivered to the Surgeon General the next day on Nov. 29. After recounting the arrival and circumstance of the sick crew, Geddings extensively and in complimentary fashion, detailed Doty's quarantine process, so far as to conclude, "I would beg to assure you that no possible precaution has been neglected... I firmly believe that the situation has been robbed of all of its dangers and that so far as the ship the J.W. Taylor is concerned, and any other of a similar nature from plague infected ports, no danger to the public health need be apprehended. It affords me great pleasure to be able to make this statement and to bear testimony to the courtesy which I have received at the hands of Dr. Doty and his assistants."<sup>xiv</sup>

The response from The Journal the following day was characteristically sensational, reiterating an old refrain with a new variation: "*NOW BURN THAT COFFEE.*" Statements from Dr. Cosby included in the article would be no less subtle, "No matter what happens, that coffee will not come into New York. We will take charge of the cargo as soon as it is released by the health officer of the port [Doty]. They can then take it back to Brazil or anywhere else, but it

can't come in here. The owners may take legal action, but that is a matter for the future."<sup>xv</sup> When asked for comment the Taylor's shipping agents in New York, Busk & Jevons, replied "We shall have to submit to the Health Board's decree. As to what we may do with the ship or cargo under the circumstances we do not care to state."<sup>xvi</sup> The decree in particular which the statements mention, was the final and possibly grandest attempt by the Board of Health to decidedly bar the cargo of the Taylor from entering the city. Citing section 1210, of the Laws of 1897, the law titled "Putrid Cargoes May Be Destroyed," read "the Board of Health, when it shall judge it necessary, may cause any cargo... or anything within the city that may be putrid or otherwise dangerous to the public health, to be destroyed or removed."<sup>xvii</sup> As this effectively gave the Board authority to deny the landing of the Taylor, even after it had completed quarantine, the conflicting parties of the Board of Health and the Port New York, had reached a seemingly insurmountable difference of opinion in which neither side was willing to cede ground.

Over the next four days, an unusual silence fell over the newspapers. As the Taylor, with its cargo unloaded into the surrounding lighters, floated uninhabited outside of the harbor, the day arrived on December 4, when Doty's quarantine would end and the cargo would be released from quarantine. With this in mind, the agents of the Taylor, Busk & Jevons, quietly applied for the ship to be admitted to customs however the request was promptly denied. Whether of genuine concern or in an attempt to not lose public standing, Doty responded by conducting his own review of the quarantine, ruling that he would keep the ship under his personal watch until ready to be released, as rats or vermin may still be present in the cargo hold. Although Doty's decision did not particularly advance or resolve the issue in any specific way, the presence of his remarks, in his usual platform The New York Times, perhaps motivated the Board of Health to release their own decision, that similar to Doty's, was primarily an empty gesture in the face of

their intractable impasse. Despite the already failed attempt to admit the ship to customs, the Board of Health organized a police patrol to watch over the ship while Doty's quarantine was officially lifted with orders to arrest anyone who attempted to board or captain the ship. As could be expected, no one was arrested that day. The New York Journal article which reported this patrol also included a small but significant segment with comments from the agents Busk & Jevons that would prove to become the new prevailing line of thinking in terms of resolving the quarantine of the Taylor.

Challenging the Journal's earlier economic arguments, the agents insisted that the refusal of the Board of Health to admit incoming ships would lead to a complete collapse of the import and coffee industry, stating, "it is useless to try to take that coffee to any other port, and the first storm that strikes it will ruin it where it is."<sup>xviii</sup> Their point was underscored in the next day as two more ships arrived from Santos, both carrying cargo holds full of coffee. The steamers Lassel and Ragusa, similarly belonged to Busk & Jevons and despite having clean bills of health, the two were subjected to the same disinfecting procedures as the Taylor bringing the number of quarantined ships to five. In a decision, unusually critical of the Board of Health, The Journal led their December 4 article about the quarantine with a decisive summary of the of the total of value of coffee form Santos currently floating in the harbor, estimating its net worth to be close to one and a half million dollars, an enormous sum of money for the time.

Three days later, when word arrived in New York that the President of the Boston Board of Health, Samuel S. Durgin, was willing to accept the shipments of quarantined coffee at his port, a mild panic broke out across the city. The Chamber of Commerce met immediately and issued a strong statement in support of Doty, detailing that "This Chamber expresses full confidence in the ability of the health officers of this port amply to protect the city and country

against the introduction of foreign infection and disease”<sup>xix</sup> To add to the mounting pressure on the Board of Health to acquiesce to Doty’s protocol, the next day’s Journal reported both the release of all crew members of the Taylor being kept at Swinburne and Hoffman Islands as well as a collision between the quarantined ships that were backing up outside of the harbor. The steamer Lassel, was hit in the congestion, and after losing a portion of its cargo due to damage, it managed to stabilize itself by immediately starting to offload its cargo to lighters. Later that day it was decided by The Coffee Exchange, a collection of leading local coffee entrepreneurs, to appoint a committee and appeal directly to President Murphy and the Board of Health. The dramatic meeting took place the following day, December 9, and according the New York Journal, “...resulted in nothing. President Murphy did most of the talking himself.”<sup>xx</sup> A particularly dramatic exchange between Doty and Murphy came when Murphy “discourse[d] learnedly and at length to the absorbent power of vegetable tissue. ‘Where did you learn all that?’ asked Dr. Doty? ‘Encyclopedia Britannica.’ Answered president Murphy. ‘Last edition published 1897.’”<sup>xxi</sup> Nevertheless, Murphy’s single concession from the meeting, to meet with the board and consider the landing of healthy ships, was indicative of the many pressures being leveled against him.

The pressure mounting against Murphy only grew after the meeting. The same day of the meeting with The Coffee Exchange, Medical News, a prominent medical journal of the period assessed the state of the quarantine and citing evidence recently published in The British Medical Journal, sided strongly with Doty’s procedure.<sup>xxii</sup> Two days later, on December 12, after two separate collisions occurred in the quarantine area—one including the Taylor, although no damage was done—Murphy was effectively left with little choice but to allow for the landing of the quarantined ships. Announced on December 13 and reported on December 14 in The New

York Times, The J.W. Taylor was replenished with its healthy crew and sailed for Queenstown, Maryland. The lighters loaded with coffee sailed to the Harbor of New York to be landed and immediately roasted by health officers. Ships arriving from infected ports now were subject to precautionary measures overseen by Doty and vessels that exhibited disease onboard were to be subjected to disinfection similar to that of the Taylor.<sup>xxiii</sup> The following day, in what marked the end of nearly a solid month of daily reporting on the Taylor, The New York Journal published its final editorial titled “On the Safe Side,” defending Murphy’s position. Recounting the devastations of plague in world history, the article strongly emphasized the sentiment of its title, repeatedly stressing that any cost of an extended quarantine, or turned-away ships, was favorable to the destruction the plague is capable of. Finally, in an impassioned personal defense of Murphy the Journal wrote, “The people who jeer at President Murphy may be extremely wise men. Perhaps they are right in saying that he is not a great bacteriologist. But if he is making a mistake, it is on the side of safety.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The legacy of the J.W. Taylor and its quarantine which pitted two early public health organizations against each other, can ultimately be viewed as a snapshot of the changing role and practice of public health in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The quarantine, which sought to prevent the spread of a lethal disease in an increasingly connected world, illuminated tensions at the heart of both the practice and ideology of public health in New York City at the turn of the century. In the grandest sense, the example of the Taylor also addresses a key question that has been central to the practice of public health throughout history: who gets to make decisions that affect the lives and well-being of a much larger group of people? In the case of the J.W. Taylor, both Dr. Doty and President Murphy were tasked with responding to multiple parts of society at once, weighing input from political, economic, social, and scientific communities. Although Doty’s protocol

eventually outlasted its opponents, and even inspired a degree of reform for processing international marine traffic, it did so with the help of immense pressure from market forces which had little regard for scientific understanding. In this sense, the quarantine prevailed as it was more responsive and transparent to the many societal inputs present in New York in 1899 and 1900. Further, Doty's quarantine served to effectively diminish his own agency, in the process creating new institutional standards and precedent, a trend that was consistent with the ongoing Progressive Era in American History. Contrasted with Murphy's insistence on a significantly greater unilateral quarantine structure, despite his best intentions, the conflict may be interpreted as a symbolic confrontation between old and new understandings of public health. Moreover, Murphy's position was equally as significant and necessary to the debate, as he consistently represented, even if dramatically so, the massive implications of what is at stake in public health implementation. Similarly, he provided a crucial critique of the structures that impacted the lives of all people living in the city, and forced both his opponents and the general public to contemplate the implications of their power.

Two weeks after the departure of the J.W. Taylor, on New Year's Eve Day, 1899, the Commissioners of Quarantine would present their annual report to the New York Assembly. In it they would detail the many proposed and necessary improvements needed at their quarantine centers at Swinburne and Hoffman Islands. Citing 1899 as the year with the highest number of quarantined subjects to date, they asked the assembly for funds to make the improvements.<sup>xxv</sup> A year later in 1900 they would submit nearly the exact same report asking for the same funds to make the same changes.<sup>xxvi</sup> Their difficulty obtaining funds to improve the quarantine system was not the only indication that public health was still beset by many of its past characteristics. On May 22, 1900 both the New York Times and Chicago Daily Tribune would report statements

made by President Murphy that the coffee from the J.W. Taylor had been roasted and secretly shipped to Chicago. Although by the date reported, the coffee would have already been consumed, the Chicago Board of Health was irate and promised a full investigation. There are no known records of the results of that investigation however what is known is that there was no major plague outbreak in Chicago. Reconsidering the prescient words of the New York Journal's first scathing editorial, that “most people do not care to drink coffee from plague ships...” this final controversy, is fittingly characteristic of a narrative filled with arguments and accusations. Yet when considering the entire narrative of the Taylor, what is more noticeable and significant than any concluding controversy itself, is how this decisive ambiguity finally highlights the realization of Dr. A.H. Doty's plan. Given the sensational and dramatic nature of the J.W. Taylor's arrival in New York, this final silence in the ship's history is arguably the single strongest argument both for the successful quarantine of the J.W. Taylor, and ultimately, the evolution of public health at the turn of the century.



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Havelburg, W. "BRAZIL. Plague at Santos." *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 14, no. 48 (1899): 2140-148.

<sup>ii</sup> "THE PLAGUE THREATENS BRAZIL." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Nov 20, 1899.

<sup>iii</sup> Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, November 19, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897]

<sup>iv</sup> "PLAGUE IS IN NEW YORK." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, Nov 19, 1899,

<sup>v</sup> "FEAR THE PLAGUE IS HERE." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Nov 19, 1899.

<sup>vi</sup> Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, November 19, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897]

<sup>vii</sup> "FEAR THE PLAGUE IS HERE." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Nov 19, 1899

<sup>viii</sup> "PLAGUE IS IN NEW YORK." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, Nov 19, 1899,

<sup>ix</sup> Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, December 2, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897]

<sup>x</sup> Geddings, H. D. "Plague on the Steamship J. W. Taylor at New York Quarantine." *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 14, no. 49 (1899): 2165-167.

<sup>xi</sup> Library Of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, November 27, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897] Newspaper.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xiv</sup> Geddings, H. D. "Plague on the Steamship J. W. Taylor at New York Quarantine." *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 14, no. 49 (1899): 2165-167.

<sup>xv</sup> Library of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, November 30, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897]

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup> United States. State of New York. *Laws of the State of New York Passed at the One Hundred and Twentieth Season of the Legislature*. Vol. 3. Albany, NY: Bank & Brothers, 1897. 432.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Library Of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, December 2, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897] Newspaper. Retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<sup>xix</sup> Library Of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, December 8, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897] Newspaper. Retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<sup>xx</sup> Library Of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, December 10, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897] Newspaper. Retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xxii</sup> "HOW TO QUARANTINE AGAINST THE PLAGUE." *Medical News (1882-1905)* 75, no. 24 (Dec 09, 1899): 761.

<sup>xxiii</sup> NYT "PLAGUE PORT SHIPS RELEASED." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 14, 1899. <http://libproxy.uoregon.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest->

<sup>xxiv</sup> Library Of Congress. *New York journal and advertiser, December 15, 1899*. [New York N.Y, 1897] Newspaper. Retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<sup>xxv</sup> United States. State Assembly of New York. Commissioners of Quarantine. *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Quarantine*. New York, NY: State of New York, 1899.

<sup>xxvi</sup> United States. State Assembly of New York. Commissioners of Quarantine. *Annual Report of the Commissioners of Quarantine*. New York, NY: State of New York, 1900.

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