The Howard Association of Galveston: The 1850s, Their Peak Years

Peggy Hildreth

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The epidemic commenced on the 1st [of September]. Since that time the burials have averaged about twelve per day. This morning ten coffins were ordered before 8 o’clock. Our Association, during the past three weeks, has expended about $1,200 ... Our population is about 4,500. The deaths up to this time amount to about 15 percent.¹

Mr. James W. Moore, president of the Howard Association of Galveston, Texas, was describing the local epidemic of 1853, the peak year of yellow fever invasions in which the Howards served, and requesting donations for the de facto organization. The Galveston group was the younger sibling of the Howard Association of New Orleans (1837-1878).² Both benevolent male societies originally concentrated on caring for indigent yellow fever sufferers, and took their inspiration and name from John Howard (1726-1790), British philanthropist famous for social and penal reforms.³ All Howards were volunteer, unpaid and unsectarian, providing treatment for all applicants in need, regardless of race, color or sex.

The birth of the first Howard Association in the South, in New Orleans in the 1830s, was in keeping with the national ferment for altruistic moral and social reform, manifesting itself in temperance leagues, asylum reforms, movements for women’s rights and abolitionism. “Americans, ... consistently form associations,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, “to give entertainments, to found seminaries, ... to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes.”⁴ As early as the 1820s some American cities even “had an embarrassment of benevolent organizations.”⁵ Howard Associations, or similar citizen groups, existed in every major American city by mid-nineteenth century, each autonomous and dealing with local problems, such as crime reduction or public health.

The Howards of New Orleans and Galveston focused on public health. In answer to the 1853 appeal from the Galveston Howards, the New Orleans group, while combating the worst yellow fever epidemic in its city’s history, sent them $1,000.⁶

When the 1853 epidemic was over, the Galveston organization wrote its charter and was incorporated by the state of Texas the following year.⁷ But in 1854 the Howards also accepted $160 in “remaining funds” from Mr. Willard

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Richardson, New Englander by birth, owner-editor-publisher of the Galveston News and politically quite influential. Richardson was also "Pres't of the Howard Association prior to 1853." Not only had the Howards been meeting before 1853, they had also served actively in the yellow fever epidemics of 1844 and 1847.

Galveston, incorporated in 1839, was a busy seaport located on an island in the semi-tropical zone off the Texas coast in the Gulf of Mexico. The city’s climate and topography were conducive to the propagation of the yellow fever mosquito and its location made it vulnerable to yellow fever infection from the Caribbean, Central and South America and possibly from West Africa. A typical early nineteenth-century city with poor drainage, open sewers and a public health problem, Galveston would withstand eight major yellow fever invasions. The first of these occurred in 1839 and claimed 25 percent of Galveston’s one thousand inhabitants. Yellow fever probably first invaded North America in 1693 via Boston, while the disease was first documented in the Gulf coast area in New Orleans in 1796.

Yellow fever, sometimes termed Yellow Jack or Saffron Scourge, is characterized by fever, body pain and headache; in its final stages, it is clearly identified by jaundice and sometimes black vomit. If the patient survives, he enjoys life-long immunity to the disease. Many natives had experienced mild childhood cases, misdiagnosed but still insuring immunity. Unaware of the reason for this safeguard, antebellum southerners believed that they possessed a natural resistance to yellow fever. It was these “immunes,” therefore, who volunteered as Howards. The Negro of West African ancestry, who had been attuned to survival from yellow fever, was even less likely to develop the disease. Not until 1900, through the efforts of Major Walter Reed, M.D., and the Yellow Fever Commission, was it proven that yellow fever is not contagious but is transmitted by the female aedes aegypti mosquito. The last major yellow fever epidemic in the nation occurred in New Orleans in 1905.

Of the eight major yellow fever epidemics in Galveston, the Howards served in six, the first in 1844. Between 1839 and 1844, the city’s population had more than trebled, due to the influx of easterners from the States and European immigrants, largely from Germany. These unacclimated, white non-natives would form the bulk of the candidates for the dreaded Yellow Yack.

There were no official provisions for public health in the Republic of Texas or the city of Galveston in 1844. Since the unacclimated strangers lacked influence, their security interests carried little political clout. As yellow fever spread in 1844 and no temporary municipal aid seemed forthcoming, several
substantial Galveston gentlemen, including Colonel Nahor B. Yard, John H. Chapman and possibly Jacob L. Briggs "associated themselves together" informally to care for the dying immigrants. Yard and Briggs were commission merchants and subsequently private bankers. Later Briggs served as one of the first directors of Samuel May Williams' Commercial and Agricultural Bank.

To raise money in 1844, these early Howards gave a benefit at Colonel John S. Sydnor's Hall on the southeast corner of Tremont and Market streets. Located over a saloon, the large hall was often rented out as a theatre. The play featured Yard "as the heavy tragedian," while Chapman furnished comic relief. The Howards used the benefit receipts to feed and medicate the ill and to bury the four hundred dead, which represented 11 percent of the city of 3,500. The epidemic over, the informal group disbanded, only to meet again in three years.

Late in September 1847 shortly after their arrival in Galveston, two German immigrants died of an illness which suspiciously resembled yellow fever. The first week in October President Willard Richardson of the Howards assured Galvestonians that the city was as healthy as could be expected for that "season of the year." But the second week in October, as tolling church bells broadcast the increased mortality, yellow fever was declared epidemic and the Howards quickly began their work among the ill. By the end of November, Yellow Jack had claimed two hundred, or 5 percent, of the city of 4,000. Among the deceased were two brothers from the East, ages eighteen and twenty, who were newcomers to Galveston and who died within a week of each other. Their untimely deaths "threw a gloom over the place and the people especially," wrote Miss Fanny Overton Trueheart, the seventeen-year-old sister of Henry Martyn Trueheart, later assessor and tax collector for Galveston County.

During the balance of the 1840s, yellow fever abated, only to return with exuberant vigor in the 1850s, when it scourged Galveston in 1853, 1854 and 1858, claiming over 1,200 victims, a population sufficient to stock a contemporary Texas town. Because of the severity of yellow fever, the fifties were the high point of Howard service in Galveston.

Yellow fever entered the nation in 1853 through the port of New Orleans in May, much earlier than usual. It was particularly virulent and ravaged towns throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas. Early in August the first cases appeared in Galveston from New Orleans aboard the S.S. City of Mexico.
but, because of the unusually cool summer, physicians assured citizens that the fever would be limited. As cases mounted, however, yellow fever was declared epidemic on September 1. Between August 30 and September 8, fifty-seven deaths occurred, "one-half to two-thirds," of which were caused by yellow fever. On September 4, fourteen deaths were recorded in a single day.\textsuperscript{32}

Under the leadership of Howard president James W. Moore, the group quickly mobilized, and, to facilitate the care of the sick, divided the city into three wards with a visiting committee headed by a chairman for each ward.\textsuperscript{33} Since there was a paucity of immune nurses, the Association pressed older residents who had survived the epidemic of 1847 into service. This group was praised by the press as "universally alive to the offices of humanity."\textsuperscript{34}

At mid-century medical knowledge in the nation was limited. Laboratory tests were unknown and the germ theory would not surface until late in the century. Unsure of the cause of yellow fever, Americans, including Galvestonians, largely blamed the disease on miasma, or bad air, which they sought to dispel by burning tar, sulphur, and old whiskey barrels. Some Texans blamed the disease on intemperance, night air, summer heat, hogs and fomites, which they believed were minute particles capable of transporting disease from infected areas by means of freight, clothing or material possessions. In keeping with this latter theory, Galveston Mayor Henry Seeligson and other city officials obtained permission from Washington, D.C. to utilize the federal lightship "as a quarantine lighter."\textsuperscript{35} This was anchored offshore for the reception and five-day detention of incoming freight. Galveston's quarantine was declared a failure later by the local press, whereas Matagorda's, which was more stringently enforced, even against "lawyers from Houston and Galveston," proved more effective.\textsuperscript{36}

In nineteenth-century port cities public health problems were subservient to mercantile interests, since even the rumor of epidemic was injurious to trade. Press coverage of Galveston epidemics was equally lax. When yellow fever began, the media ignored its presence; as deaths increased, they devoted columns to the scourged cities of Louisiana and Alabama. When the disease was declared epidemic locally, mortality statistics were usually minimized.

In keeping with this practice, the Galveston \textit{News}, in spite of reporting on October 9, 1853 that deaths from yellow fever were averaging seven per day, claimed that this was nothing in comparison with mortality from the disease in Houston,
Indianola and Lavaca. The paper did admit, however, that Galveston had lost four physicians and six of its eight Catholic priests in the epidemic.

### HOWARD ASSOCIATION OF GALVESTON, 1844-1882

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Galveston Population</th>
<th>Yellow Fever Mortality</th>
<th>Percentage of Population Dead of Y.F.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>1,150</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The fever raged through November into December, coming to a halt ten days before Christmas. Of the city of 4,500, 536 had died, which represented approximately 12 percent of the city, among yellow fever epidemics in Galveston second only to the 25 percent dead in 1839. The Howards cared for 282 patients, of whom seventy-six, or 21 percent, died. In addition to paying the burial expenses of their clients, the benevolent group volunteered to bury fifty other indigents, who had not been under its care.

The forty-five Howards in 1853 were divided into three groups: officers, fund raisers and nurses, although members often served in several roles or exchanged duties. President James W. Moore, vice-president O.C. Hartley, secretary J.P. Schwalm, and treasurer Henry Jenkins were administrative officers. A Virginian by birth, Moore was clerk of the district court; Jenkins was cashier at the Agricultural and Commercial Bank, while six fund raisers of various backgrounds made up the collection committee.

The balance of thirty five members were laymen visiting nurses. Included in this group were ex-New Yorker Lorenzo Sherwood, lawyer-economist involved in railroad speculation; his partner, attorney William H. Goddard; county clerk and alderman Oscar Farish, a veteran of the battle of San Jacinto; and Christopher H. Pix, a vestryman of the Episcopal Trinity Church.

As yellow fever cases mounted, the Howards delegated the care of the sick to hired nurses, usually mulatresses, who were
often free women of color. These were paid between $1 and $1.50 for a twelve-hour day and $3 for twenty-four hour duty.47

Patterning their treatment on that of their mentors in New Orleans, Howard care of the sick centered on simple home care and the comfort of the patient. They stressed open bowels, simple diet and rest. For fever reduction, they recommended moderate doses of quinine, ice administered orally and cooling sponge baths. The Howards occasionally hired a cupper for bleeding.

Physicians, on the other hand, besides massive bleeding and blistering with hot mustard poultices, prescribed, among other things, ten grains of calomel followed by castor oil, twenty four grains of quinine three times daily, powdered charcoal, oil of black pepper and extract of dandelions.48 Considering these heroic doses and exotic potions, and in view of twentieth-century medical knowledge,49 the common-sense nursing services of the Howards gain validity.

To finance its charities during the epidemic of 1853, the Association raised in excess of $7,600, of which $5,500 was spent. Over one-half of its expenditures were for nursing, medicine and physicians' expenses, including livery bills and medicine administered by the doctor. More than $900 went for clothing, bedding, meat and wood to materially aid the indigent ill and a similar sum covered the burial expenses of the 126 deceased. Welfare to "Needy Families and Strangers" accounted for over $200. Peripheral action, a contemporary term used to describe aid to outlying towns, came to $500, which was given to yellow fever sufferers in Indianola and Port Lavaca.50

The chief Howard method of fund raising consisted of contacting business ties, such as commercial firms in the East engaged in the cotton trade with Galveston. For example, in 1853 the New York firm of E.M. Green and M. McGrath acted as a depository for local donors. This money was then forwarded through the Galveston firm of Jacob L. Briggs and J.C. Shaw to the Howards.51

Besides New Yorkers, the Sandwich Glass Company of Boston sent $25. Philadelphians contributed as did Texans in Austin, Rock Island Post Office and Nacogdoches. Galvestonians also donated. William Pitt Ballinger, who lost several children to yellow fever, gave $15 and Samuel May Williams contributed $20. The crew from the schooner Jane Elizabeth sent $2.50 and the Contribution Box, Verandah, probably on the porch of the Howard office, yielded $1.60.52 Other gifts were material objects, such as one-half cord of wood, valued at $3, and a book collection, which the Howards sold.53 In 1848 one material gift consisted of six dozen cooped-up, cackling
chickens from the ladies of Saluria, delivered to the Howard office by the Matagorda Pilots' Association.\textsuperscript{54}

The seriousness of the yellow fever epidemic of 1853 is indicated by the fifteen weeks of the period, which was more than double the length of the usual fever season, as well as by the mortality of 536 persons. The personal aspect of these statistics is brought home by a letter written to Gail Borden of condensed milk fame by Judge James P. Cole, who later became a Howard:

We have had an awful summer. I have witnessed [previous] epidemics . . . but nothing like the present, . . . either in the malignancy of the disease or the distress, moral and material, consequent upon it. Brother Shackelford, a member of our church came here last spring from Bastrop to spend a couple of years for the health of his wife and to educate his children, especially a son . . . 14 years of age. Early in the epidemic, his youngest child died and was buried in the corner of the lot they occupied. The father returned [after an absence from the city] . . . only in time to lay his beautiful boy along side of the first. He seemed crushed to the earth, but alas! his troubles were not over; for eventually, he and a daughter of his wife's were left alone of the seven who came here in the spring.\textsuperscript{55}

For Howard service in the epidemic of 1853, the press praised the men who "have been indefatigable in their exertions and deserve all honor for their noble and disinterested benevolence."\textsuperscript{56} The epidemic over, the Howards borrowed the charter and the seal of the head of John Howard from the Howards of New Orleans, and wrote their charter, constitution and by-laws, modeling them on those of the older organization.\textsuperscript{57}

The following year they were chartered by the state as a non-profit corporation whose purpose was "relief to the indigent sick and the destitute, and especially so . . . during the prevalence of the yellow fever and other epidemics." In keeping with their corporate status they were capable of holding real estate, which they limited to $50,000. At the expiration of their charter in twenty-five years, the Association requested that its holdings be given to the city of Galveston to be used as a hospital fund. Provision was made for a widows' and orphans' fund.\textsuperscript{58}

In its constitution and by-laws, the Howards limited membership to twenty-five. Each prospective member was to make application in writing and be reviewed by a committee, which, in view of the consistent membership problems, seems unrealistic. Experienced members were responsible for the training of the new. Honorary non-voting membership was created. The five administrative officers were to be elected
annually on the first Monday of May. The duties of these officers and the committees under their supervision were carefully spelled out.

The Howard pattern of mustering, fund raising and caring for the sick was followed in the epidemics of 1854 and 1858, in which 404 and 344 respectively died. After the epidemics of the fifties were over, the Howards met to assess the situation and plan future tactics. They estimated that the care of a single patient in 1858 had averaged $20 and believed that they could halve this cost if they were allowed to construct a Howard hospital, which they had been requesting since 1854. They also stated that with efficient hospital care, mortality from yellow fever could be reduced from 25 to 15 percent.

Through the efforts of a dedicated soliciting committee, consisting of Howards, Ferdinand Flake of Flake's Bulletin, J.M. Jones and Henri de St. Cyr, the Galveston City Company in 1859 offered to donate Outlot 68 in the southeast quarter of the city as a site for the Howard Infirmary. Galvestonians, however, refused to subscribe to a fever hospital within city limits, and the plans were shelved forever.

The Howards faced other problems incident to epidemics, such as the distribution of children orphaned by yellow fever. In order to place them, the Howards often outfitted the youngsters. In 1859, even with the expenditure of $2.40 to spruce up an orphan boy named Klay, Howard John W. Jockusch, the Prussian Consul to Galveston, had difficulty in placing him in a private home. The foster mother not only returned her $8 wages, but also the boy. The premature digging of graves by the church sextons presented another dilemma. The sextons wanted to stay ahead of their work, but desisted when the Howards refused payment for unordered graves. No doubt the Howards were concerned about the psychological impact of this practice on the ill and their families.

After the height of their career in the fifties, although the Howards kept the organization viable until 1882, they served in only one more yellow fever epidemic, that of 1867. In this last major epidemic in the city, 1,150 died of yellow fever, which represented 9 percent of the city's population of approximately 13,000. This did not rival the 12 percent mortality of 1853.

Organizations do not usually die rapidly. They often last years beyond their actual usefulness and along the way have periods of revival. Only in retrospect does the steady downgrade become apparent. This was the case with the Howards.
During the next fifteen years after their last active service in Galveston in 1867, the Howards sent aid to yellow fever patients in Calvert and Marshall, Texas in 1973 and to sufferers of the disease in Memphis, Tennessee and Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1878. Galveston had no yellow fever epidemic that year, but the epidemic that ravaged the rest of the nation impressed the group that the disease was still rampant. As a result, the organization rallied and in 1879 renewed its charter for fifty more years. Shortly before the rechartering, the men had voted that the names of Jacob L. Briggs, J. Frederick, J. Gloor, C.R. Reynolds and Ferdinand Flake, who had died since the last epidemic, be inscribed on a memorial page in the minutes in recognition of their work for the Association.

Six months later, however, a financial blow fell. The Howards were obliged to write off an uncollectable loan of $5,084.35. In accordance with their by-laws, they were allowed to loan money at interest. Mr. Peter Erhard, to whom the loan had been made, had had insurmountable business reversals and was dying. The Howards wrote off his loan.

From the inception of the organization, keeping members had proven difficult. Most members served in only one epidemic and then resigned. Finding immune replacements, who were willing to perform menial chores without pay for long hours during the summer heat, was no easy task. Probably the combination of dwindling funds and thinning ranks - from deaths and membership problems - contributed to the Howard denouement.

On May 1, 1882 the last entry occurs in the records. The Howards had paid their bills and the treasurer reported $5,500 in outstanding loans and over $1,400 in cash on hand. The group had just elected officers for the coming year. There is nothing conclusive in the message or tone of the entry. It can be assumed that the group had every intention of continuing its activities. But Galveston no longer needed the Howards; unknowing, they waited. No other organization took the Howards' place, nor will.

Although no clue seems to exist as to the final disposition of the Howard cash or uncollected loans, the altruistic volunteer group had served the indigent ill of Galveston during six epidemics from 1844 through 1867 and dispensed over a quarter of a million dollars. To echo the News, this was noble benevolence. It was also Texas Good Samaritanism at its best.

NOTES

1New Orleans Picayune, October 1, 1853; hereinafter cited as Picayune.


7Ibid., 13.

8Earl Wesley Fornell. The Galveston Era (Austin, 1961), 142-43.

9Howard Report, 1853, 6.


12John Duffy, Epidemics in Colonial America (Baton Rouge, 1953), 141.


16Carrigan, 279.


18Fornell, 66.

19Charles W. Hayes, Galveston (Cincinnati, 1879), II, 852.

20Fornell, 41.

21Margaret Swett Henson, Samuel May Williams (College Station, Texas, 1976), 140.

22Hayes, II, 932.

23Ibid., II, 852.

24Mortality statistics: Sternberg, op. cit.; population: Ben Stuart, op. cit.

25Galveston News, April 11, 1942.

26Ben Stuart, op. cit.

27Mortality statistics: Sternberg, op. cit.; population: Ben Stuart, op. cit.

28Letter dated October 31, 1847 from Miss Fanny Overton Trueheart to her aunt, Miss Kitty T. Minor of Louisa County, Virginia, Henry Martyn Trueheart Papers, MS, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.
Unpublished biographical sketch of the Trueheart family, Archives, Rosenberg Library, Galveston; also interview March 2, 1978 with Mrs. John McCullough of Galveston, granddaughter of Henry Martyn Trueheart.

Galveston News, April 11, 1942.

Galveston News, as cited in Picayune, October 13, 1853.

Galveston Journal, as cited in Picayune, September 14, 1853.

Galveston News, September 20, 1853.

Galveston Journal, as cited in Picayune, September 14, 1853; Galveston News, as cited in Picayune, October 13, 1853.

Galveston News, as cited in Picayune, September 14, 1853.

Galveston News, as cited in Picayune, October 13, 1853.

The memorial to the six Catholic priests still stands at St. Mary's Cathedral, Galveston.

Mortality statistics: Sternberg, op cit.; population: President James W. Moore of the Howard Association of Galveston, as cited in Picayune, October 1, 1853.

Howard Report, 1853, 7.

Ibid., 8.

Document No. 25-0089, Papers of Gail Borden, Jr., 1801-1874, MS, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.

Henson, 146.

Fornell, 144.

Ibid., 164.

Galveston News, Supplement, April 21, 1872.

Fornell, 80.

Minutes of August 22, September 23, 1854, Records, The Howard Association of Galveston, 1854-1882, MS, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, hereinafter cited as Minutes.

Nixon, 302-03.

Today massive bleeding and blistering as medical treatments are in disrepute. Mustard poultices are non-therapeutic. The calomel cited, followed by castor oil, is a large purgative dose. Seventy-two grains of quinine daily is termed excessive and "head-ringing." Charcoal, black pepper and dandelions are of no medicinal value in the treatment of yellow fever. Interview March 1, 1978 with William Bennett Bean, M.D., Director, Department of Medical Humanities, University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas.

Howard Report, 1853, 7.

Ibid., 3.

Ibid., 4-7.

Ibid., 6.

Minutes, October 15, 1848.

Galveston News, as cited in *Picayune.* October 13, 1853.

Howard Report, 1853, 11-21.


Sternberg, *op. cit.*


Minutes. February 1, May 27, August 5, 1859.

Fornell, 46.

Minutes. February 1, May 27, 1859.


Minutes. May 24, 1879.

