

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Wilfred H. Kellogg, bacteriologist for the city of San Francisco, began a political firestorm with the announcement of a confirmed case of bubonic plague in the spring of 1900.¹ The death of the Chinese laborer, found in the basement of the Globe Hotel on March 6, 1900, was the beginning of a public health and political crisis. Before the plague had passed, the city would be torn apart by political infighting, polarizing the city's newspapers, politicians, business and medical communities. The outbreak would intensify the open discrimination against the city's Chinese population, highlighting a history of stigmatism and neglect. The plague would destroy professional careers, bring state and federal quarantines against California, provoke openly hostile newspaper coverage, and ignite political battles involving everybody from the city pathologist up to and including the President of the United States.

Fearing quarantine and the blockage of trade against California, the state's business interests and politicians aggressively sought to hide the problem from the rest of the nation. The ensuing war between public health officials, fighting to protect the city from plague, and the state's businessmen and politicians, fighting to protect their economic fortunes, was a matter of national concern in 1900.

¹ W. H. Kellogg, "The Plague--Report of Cases," *Occidental Medical Times* 14:7 (July 1900): 197.

The history of public health in California is not widely studied. While the plague outbreak of 1900 has been covered in scholarly articles over the years, there are no book length studies of the first epidemic and relatively few journal articles of any value. With few exceptions, the scholarship tends to stay close to the account of events provided by Dr. W. H. Kellogg in "Present Status of Plague with Historical Review," published in 1920.² Kellogg was the bacteriologist for San Francisco at the time of the 1900 outbreak, and brought the first plague victim to the attention of the federal authorities. Chief among the histories which follow Kellogg's first-hand account is Vernon B. Link's "A History of Plague in the United States of America," published by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1955.³ In addition to Link's official government history of events, early works include those of Silvio Onesti, Victor Hass, and Loren George Lipson.⁴ Expanding on these traditional works is "The Black Death in Chinatown," by Philip Kalisch, published in 1972.⁵ By making use of material in the National Archives, Kalisch offers the most detailed account of the epidemic of the time.

2 W. H. Kellogg, "Present status of plague with historical review," *American Journal of Public Health* 10:11 (November 1920): 835-844.

3 Vernon B. Link, "A History of Plague in the United States of America," *Public Health Monograph* No. 26, Publication No. 392 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955)

4 Silvio J. Onesti, "Plague, Press, and Politics," *Stanford Medical Bulletin* 13:1 (February 1955): 1-10; Victor H. Haas, "When Bubonic Plague Came To Chinatown," *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 8:1 (January 1959): 141-147; and Loren George Lipson, "Plague in San Francisco in 1900," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 77:2 (August 1972): 303-310.

5 Philip A Kalisch, "The Black Death in Chinatown: Plague and Politics in San Francisco 1900-1904," *Arizona and the West* 14:2 (1972): 112-136.

His study follows the basic account provided by Kellogg, and cites the additional primary sources to expand on the political nature of the medical crisis.

Following Kalisch in building on the work of Kellogg and Link, the most notable early work is “The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905,” by Joan B. Trauner.⁶ In her 1978 article, Trauner briefly details the social and public health history of prejudice and abuse against the Chinese population of the city. The author focuses on the fact that the Chinese were consistently blamed as the source of the various contagious diseases afflicting San Francisco's population. Expanding on Trauner's early writing, Nayan Shah's studies of San Francisco's Chinatown and the political context of public health stand out as the most comprehensive. In both his 1995 dissertation and in his recently published book, *Contagious Divides*, Shah provides a detailed understanding of the racial, political, and cultural dynamics at play in San Francisco, and how these factors came to affect public health policy towards the city's Chinese population.⁷ While Shah devotes a chapter in his book to the 1900 plague outbreak, his work stays focused on the Chinese community, and doesn't consider the larger political issues at play in San Francisco which the outbreak helped to expose.

⁶ Joan B. Trauner, “The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905,” *California History* 57 (1978): 70-87.

⁷ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Nayan Shah, “San Francisco's Chinatown: Race and the Cultural Politics of Public Health, 1854-1952.” Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1995.

Enlarging on the political and social histories cited above, Charles McClain has written an excellent study concerning the legal aspects of the discriminatory quarantines placed on Chinatown during the 1900 crisis.⁸ McClain's study describes the events and circumstances which led to successful anti-discrimination law suits against Joseph James Kinyoun, the federal health official in charge of containing the San Francisco outbreak, and the local Board of Health. In the mid 1990's two excellent synthesis works appeared which brought the history of the first plague epidemic up to date. The first is provided by Alan Mayne in his book, *The Imagined Slum*, published in 1993.⁹ Finally, Guenter Risse's, "The Politics of Fear: Bubonic Plague in San Francisco, California, 1900," was presented at an international conference on the history of medicine, held in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1994.¹⁰

Current scholarship devoted to the 1900 plague outbreak concentrates on the events following the discovery of plague in Chinatown in March of 1900. Some of the work traces the origin of the outbreak back to the summer of 1899, when the ship *Nippon Maru* arrived in San Francisco with a history of plague on board. While the *Nippon Maru* incident is often cited as the first infectious episode of the 1900 plague outbreak,

8 Charles J. McClain, "Of Medicine, Race, and American Law: The Bubonic Plague Outbreak of 1900," *Law and Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (1988): 447-513.

9 Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870-1914* (Leicester University Press: Leicester, London and New York, 1993), 3-56.

10 Guenter B. Risse, "The Politics of Fear: Bubonic Plague in San Francisco, California, 1900," in *New Countries and Old Medicine: Proceedings of an International Conference on the History of Medicine and Health*, Auckland, New Zealand, 1994, ed. Linda Bryder and Derek A. Dow (Auckland, New Zealand: Pyramid Press, 1995.), 1-19.

the origins of the political crisis which accompanied the epidemic has been largely ignored.

This study will explore the origins and features of the political environment into which the plague arrived and ignited a medico-political crisis between California and the federal government. The fight over the outbreak of plague and how to control it was the culmination of a struggle for control that had been going on for many years. As the *San Francisco Examiner* put it in 1899,

This effort now being made in San Francisco to grab the quarantine service from the local and State authorities, and concentrate it in the Marine Hospital Service under the Secretary of the Treasury, is merely part of a scheme to do away with local quarantine regulations and local quarantine officers all over the United States and to centralize everything in the Federal control. This effort has been going on ever since the Marine Hospital Service, by hook or crook, superseded the National Board of Health.¹¹

Indeed, local quarantine inspection authority began to be challenged by the United States Marine Hospital Service (MHS) under John B. Hamilton in 1884 when the service won out over its rival, the National Board of Health, to become the nation's primary public health agency. A concentrated effort to assume federal control began in 1891 when Walter Wyman became supervising surgeon-general,¹² succeeding Hamilton. Those efforts picked up momentum after the passage of the 1893 National Quarantine Act, and intensified again with the realization that an epidemic of plague in Asia had become a pandemic by 1897, and would, sooner or later, arrive in the United States.

¹¹ *San Francisco Examiner*, August 25, 1899.

¹² The title, "Supervising Surgeon-General" was changed to the current "Surgeon General" in 1902 by an act of Congress. This study uses the terms interchangeably.

This thesis addresses three key issues. First and foremost, it explores the shape and consequences of the inherent conflicts of interest between public health authorities and businessmen and civic boosters. During an epidemic business interests often wish to control economic damage by suppressing news of a public health crisis within their community. At the same time, public health authorities frequently need to take very public actions to control the outbreak. In 1900, California came very close to having the federal government enforce a complete quarantine against the state for its failure to address the issue. For his part in the cover-up, Governor Henry Tift Gage of California (1899-1903) was made to look ridiculous, and his political career was indelibly tarnished by his refusal to admit the existence of plague in San Francisco.

Second, this thesis attempts to shed some light on the historically complex power struggles which were exposed by the political crisis of 1900. While some political interests in San Francisco were antagonistic toward federal authorities, others supported the federal position. Indeed, within groups of political constituencies, opinions and positions varied across time and issues.

During the late 1890's, for example, the fight for control over local quarantine inspection was couched as a states' rights issue in defense of a few political patronage jobs. San Francisco's old Board of Health had opposed the federal takeover of the quarantine inspection service in 1897 in order to protect its quarantine inspection fees. By 1900, a newly appointed board, under a new city charter, backed the federal position on fighting the plague once it arrived in the city. In contrast, the Southern Pacific Company welcomed the federal takeover of quarantine inspection in the 1890's because

it standardized their operating procedures from port to port and reduced inspection fees. Then in 1900, fearing a commercial quarantine against San Francisco if news of plague got out, the transportation giant led the fight to deny the existence of the epidemic. In both cases, the Southern Pacific, along with the rest of the business community, was trying to protect its profits. In 1900, the governor backed California's business interests over San Francisco's Board of Health and the city's Chinese population.

Third, this paper considers the political forces within the United States MHS, which was as much guided by its own political needs as was the Southern Pacific Railroad or California's Governor Gage. Surgeon General Wyman was relentless in his drive to take control over port inspection away from local and state authorities; he appears to have been just as manipulative and single-minded in dealing with people within his own agency.

Each of the three main issues revolves around money and politics. The political crisis which arrived with the plague in 1900 was not just a reaction to loss of local control over port inspection to federal officials, but was part of a much larger struggle in California over political and financial control. The outbreak brought California's political machinery into contact and conflict with the MHS, then part of the Treasury Department. California's response to the unwanted arrival of the federal agency offers a chance to look inside the state's political house. In addition, the crisis provides a glimpse of the politics at play within the MHS and the office of the surgeon general.

Indeed, the plague outbreak of 1900 provides a window onto the political landscape and characters of the time. California's political machine was a steam

locomotive run by corporate interests, most notably Southern Pacific Railroad. From the governor on down to the “mushman” in the kitchen of San Francisco’s receiving hospital, control of government jobs was a function of party politics and political cronyism. One of the most interesting characters in this study, and a man whose political career seems almost entirely forgotten, is Governor Gage, a political scoundrel extraordinaire, and completely beholden to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company.

In addition to acting as an agent for the railroad, Governor Gage also sought advantage for himself and his friends. The problem was that Gage was none too subtle about his choices, and early on, the public began to suspect that his campaign promises had been tossed out of the governor’s mansion with the rest of the inauguration party debris. While history records that his administration was tainted by the “plague incident,” which this study details, Gage was covered with so much political backwash from endless scheming that it is hard to pick out the definitive cause of his political death in the 1902 primary. That said, this study helps fill in some of the historical pages that are otherwise left blank in the political biography of Governor Gage.

In the same way California’s history is opened to view, the crisis opens a window onto the internal politics of the federal public health service under Walter Wyman. Much of our ability to see into the inner workings of the MHS comes from the preserved papers of two men closely associated with the plague outbreak in San Francisco. The first is Milton Rosenau, the man chosen by Surgeon General Wyman to lead the federal takeover of San Francisco’s quarantine inspection during the late 1890’s. The political animosity between California and the Marine Hospital Service is a direct result of the methods that

Rosenau and Wyman employed during their successful bid to wrest control away from the local political machine. Rosenau was rewarded by Wyman for his work in San Francisco by being given the directorship of the service's quickly expanding hygienic laboratory. From there, he went on to create the first school of public health in the nation at Harvard University and to end his career at the University of North Carolina, where his papers now rest. These papers provide wonderful insight into the service's deliberate takeover of the San Francisco quarantine inspection and the political gamesmanship that Wyman and his agency engaged in order to win control away from local authorities.

Joseph J. Kinyoun, the Marine Hospital Service's quarantine officer in charge of controlling the outbreak in 1900, also left behind papers, now residing at the National Library of Medicine. Kinyoun came under intense personal attack by the California political machine for openly reporting news concerning the plague epidemic in San Francisco. For the sin of placing public health before politics, his career as a scientist in the Marine Hospital Service was destroyed. As Kellogg put it, the "campaign of vilification" against Kinyoun, "for unexampled bitterness, unfair and dishonest methods, probably never had been and never again will be equaled."¹³

In 1899, Surgeon General Wyman, who controlled every aspect of the MHS and the men under his command, removed Kinyoun from his position as the service's founder and director of its hygienic laboratory, and transferred him out to the docks of San Francisco to meet the oncoming plague. Forced to trade places with Rosneau, Kinyoun

13 Kellogg, "Present status of plague," 838.

was subjected to daily attacks in the press, in the courts, and from the California Governor's office for enforcing Wyman's quarantine control over the outbreak. When it came time to cut a political deal between the MHS and the state, Kinyoun's career was sacrificed by Wyman as a political gift to Governor Gage.

In Kinyoun's papers is a long private letter to Preston Bailhache, a senior MHS officer, in which he bitterly describes his situation. In the letter, Kinyoun refers to Bailhache's earlier idea that Kinyoun should write a complete report to be used as the basis for a book on the San Francisco plague outbreak and its surrounding politics. Perhaps only partly tongue-in-cheek, Kinyoun writes "In thinking over the matter, I believe that paraphrasing of [Victor] Hugo's immortal work entitled 'Les Miserables,' would be, perhaps, the best title for the letter which you are to grace with the idea of its being a book. The legend 'Les Miserables en Quarentaine' would perhaps be a title which would not, to our minds, be misleading."¹⁴ The book, if written, was never published, and is now lost to history.

While the 1900 plague outbreak is the focal point where the lives of these men cross, it also is the vehicle from which a historical review of federal and state quarantine inspection policies can be made. In light of current events, a study of the history of

14 Kinyoun to Dr. Bailhache, August 9, 1900, p. 61. MS C 464, Joseph J. Kinyoun papers, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland. [Hereafter called "Kinyoun papers."]

disease control holds some interest and possibly some lessons as we revamp our national public health service to deal with today's public health issues.