

## August Exodus

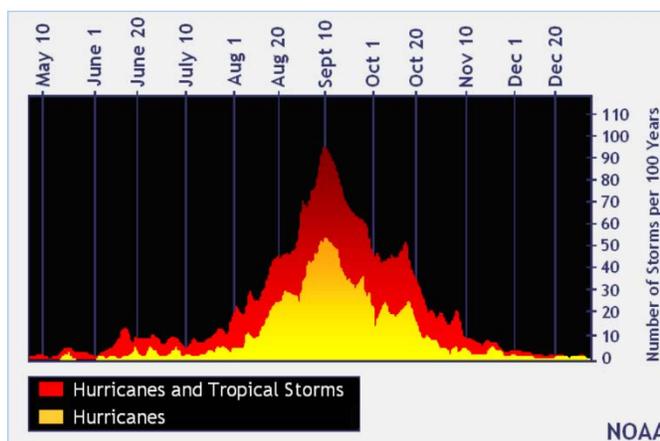
*Summertime populations plunged in New Orleans throughout the 1800s—but not on account of hurricanes.*

Richard Campanella

Published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 4, 2017

An oft-cited government graph shows visually what every New Orleansian knows viscerally: August brings increasingly favorable conditions for tropical storms, and with them come apprehensions of disruption and destruction. Not until late October do the odds drop, and the breathing eases.

It's an annual anxiety shared by all metro-area residents, and it forms a sort of psychological bond with our forebears of the nineteenth century—but for different reasons.



It was yellow fever they dreaded, and its main season coincided perfectly with peak hurricane season: August through October.

Certainly, hurricanes were feared in that era. But, even as storms struck with minimal warning, their effects were rarely fatal for city dwellers. Vast coastal wetlands absorbed most of the surge, and urbanization had not yet expanded into the swamps—which had not yet subsided. Hurricanes were largely wind events in those days; New Orleansians took shelter locally, and repaired the damage next day.

Yellow fever plagues, on the other hand, were unnervingly foreseeable, as neighbors and kin would suddenly fall ill, and frightful in their affects. “Yellow jack” would kill over 100,000 Louisianans and nearly 40,000 New Orleansians between 1796 and 1905, with over half of all local deaths occurring between 1847 and 1858. During the worst-ever summer of 1853, close to one in ten New Orleansians did not live to see Christmas.

Experts did not understand what caused yellow fever, leaving residents to suspect everything from swamps to effluvium to “strangers,” meaning newcomers, who seemed to be particularly vulnerable to the “saffron scourge.” Ignorance bred fear, and fear led to a coldly rational response: wholesale evacuation. Those who had sufficient wherewithal and empowerment departed New Orleans as August approached, leaving behind everyone else to fend for themselves.

Those who stayed for the “sickly season” found themselves in an eerily quiet city, for two reasons: their wealthier neighbors took with them their fiscal clout, which depressed the local economy, while vessels avoided docking for fear of their crews falling ill—which starved the city of commerce. Worse yet, a substantial transient population, including Northern businessmen who kept the exchange hotels full and

the saloons hopping during the “commercial season,” also fled what was known as “the necropolis of the South.” It was a vicious cycle: yellow fever scared off money, which hurt the economy, which scared off more money, which beleaguered those who remained with both monetary and health woes. Visitors, needless to say, were especially anxious about the ominous calendar. Bemoaned Henry Tudor upon arriving at New Orleans in 1831, “I am now at the head-quarters of Death!... And were it the month of August or September[,] I should scarcely expect to be alive this day [next] week.”

The “terrible malady,” wrote visitor Hugh Murray in 1828, “makes its first appearance in the early days of August, and continues till October. During that era New Orleans appears like a deserted city; all who possibly can, fly to the north or the upper country, most of the shops are shut, and the silence of the streets is only interrupted by the sound of the hearse passing through them.”



*Dramatic depiction of ‘yellow jack’ during an 1873 epidemic in Florida; by Matt Morgan, courtesy Library of Congress.*

Eye-witness accounts help quantify the August exodus. One journalist writing in 1831 estimated New Orleans’ permanent population “near 60,000,” and added “there are frequently from 25 to 50,000 strangers in the place” during the winter. Another observer in the late 1840s wrote that while the city’s official population exceeded 100,000, “a transient population of thirty or forty thousand [departs] in swarms... as soon as the warm season commences, [and returns] as wild geese do from the North, on the first appearance of a flake of snow.”

All this made summertime New Orleans not just numerically smaller and economically quieter than winter, but socially and culturally transformed. Those who evacuated were overwhelmingly white and more likely to be recently arrived from the East Coast, which meant they were likely Anglo-Saxon, Anglophone, and/or Protestant. This left the remaining population in the city to be more immigrant, Francophone, and Catholic, not to mention more likely to be Creole (meaning locally born regardless of race), African in ancestry, and enslaved in caste. (Those of African ancestry, as well as Creoles “acclimated” through childhood exposure, were thought to be more resistant to yellow fever, but this was probably more perception than reality.)

and stenches we ever experienced. Walking up and down the new basin and canal last week, our olfactory nerves were terribly agitated. We have withstood the effluvia of the filth of our city for more than two score years; we have withstood the decomposition of dead bodies during the cholera of 1832, but never have we withstood such ineffable compounds as can be snuffed on the upper canal and basin. It appears to be the reservoir of two or three refineries located in a central part of the city. If, however, it is the intent of the proprietors of these refineries to breed yellow fever, to defend the city against the assaults of the Yankees, and to prevent their occupancy of our city,

*Commentary on local disease conditions, New Orleans Daily Crescent, April 16, 1862.*

The August exodus also made New Orleans more gender-balanced in its demographics. Most wintertime visitors were men, making the city decidedly male-dominated during the commercial season, a bit like a frontier city. Come summer, they fled. Making matters worse were the residential settlement patterns of the antebellum metropolis, which tended to position the impoverished, including immigrants, by the backswamp or in the muddy banlieues (outskirts).

Therein lay clues to yellow fever’s vector. In an early example of local public-health research, Dr. Edward H. Barton plotted mortality rates from 1787 to 1853 against soil-disturbance

events, such as “Canal Carondelet dug,” “Trenches dug around the City & Swamp exposed,” “Drained the rear of 2<sup>nd</sup> District,” “Immense excavations...for foundation of Customhouse....” Barton found correlations between stagnant water and disease outbreaks—but could not quite pinpoint the cause. Most experts continued to blame the water itself, which they believed released noxious vapors called “miasmas.” The biggest source of miasmas, they reasoned, was New Orleans’ backswamp, and the best defense was to get away from it as August approached.

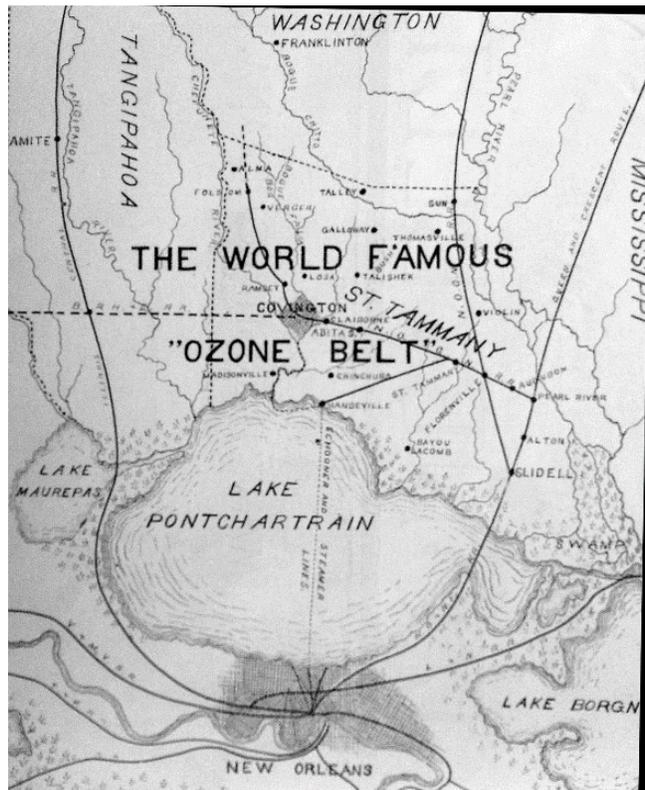
Where did the August exodus go? Northerners went home; locals decamped east to Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian and Biloxi, or south to Grand Isle, where cottages and hotels awaited them. Others ventured to Pensacola and Galveston. The largest numbers went “across the lake” by steamer or rail, to Madisonville, Mandeville, Covington and Abita Springs. All these destinations boasted some combination of piney woods, artesian springs, or salty water bodies. To the medical sensibilities of the day, these environmental attributes not only precluded malady, but imparted remedy. A *Picayune* journalist in 1855 raved of present-day Abita Springs’ “sparkling liquid that gushes from springs” and its “bracing air, impregnated with the odor of the pine,” deemed beneficial for “the healthy as well as the invalid.” People came to call St. Tammany Parish the “ozone belt,” perceiving that its pine trees exuded balsam, which interacted with electricity to destroy malignant microbes and produce cathartic fresh air. The Ozone Belt became a health-tourism destination every summer for generations.

It seemed to work; people indeed evaded yellow fever by evacuating to these environs. But it was not for the reasons they credited. What saved them was getting away from the unsanitary conditions of the high-density metropolis, where the true culprit, the invasive *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, thrived in stagnant water and feasted on nearby human blood meals.

The following table has been constructed from the records preserved by Dr. Bennet Dowler, Dr. Edward H. Barton, Dr. Erasmus Fenner and others, and by the various Boards of Health. We will not now discuss the different estimates in certain years by different writers, the data being sufficient to show the absence and limited spread of yellow fever when no disinfection was practiced.

Year.	Deaths from yellow fever	Year.	Deaths from yellow fever	Year.	Deaths from yellow fever
1817	800	1839	800	1859	92
1818	115	1840	3	1860	15
1819	425	1841	1800	1861	
1820	400	1842	211	1862	2
1822	808	1843	692	1863	2
1823		1844	148	1864	6
1824	108	1845	2	1865	1
1825	49	1846	160	1866	185
1826	5	1847	2600	1867	3107
1827	109	1848	872	1868	3
1828	130	1849	769	1869	3
1829	900	1850	107	1870	587
1830	117	1851	17	1871	54
1831	2	1852	456	1872	39
1832	400	1853	7849	1873	226
1833	1000	1854	2316	1874	11
1834	95	1855	2615	1875	61
1835		1856	74	1876	42
1836	5	1857	200	1877	1
1837	1300	1858	4855	1878	4056
1838					

*Yellow fever epidemics in New Orleans from 1817 to 1878, according to an 1878 study.*



*From 'The World Famous Ozone Belt,' by J I and W Sanford, 1904.*

It took many collaborating medical researchers to finally solve the yellow fever mystery. Among them were Cuban epidemiologist Dr. Carlos Finlay, who in 1882 first identified *Aedes aegypti* as a vector; American physician Dr. Walter Reed, who in 1900 confirmed it; and New Orleans' own Dr. Stanford Emerson Chaille, who had studied the 1878 epidemic and advocated tirelessly for hygiene and urban sanitation. After one final epidemic in 1905, which claimed over 400 lives mostly in the lower French Quarter, modern sanitation improvements and public-health regulations took effect, and both yellow fever and the August exodus came to pass.

Conditions improved in New Orleans to the point that death rates, once the highest in the nation, became indistinguishable from other cities. Perhaps the most influential municipal improvement was not the drainage of the backswamp but the installation of the water treatment plant, which antiquated the city's thousands of cisterns—wooden tanks for the storage of rainwater, veritable mosquito farms.

Afterwards, people of means continued to depart summertime New Orleans—but for leisure, not safety. The Ozone Belt thrived as a summer getaway into the 1920s, and Biloxi into the 1960s.

At the same time, however, coastal wetlands eroded, urban land sunk below sea level, and people moved into harm's way. Hurricane surges became more deadly, and authorities began recommending evacuation over sheltering in place. Then, starting in 1995, tropical activity increased, and over the next two decades, a series of minor and major storms would strike, most of them during August to October. One named Katrina would prove catastrophic in 2005, causing not just an exodus but a diaspora, permanent for many.

It would have been a trauma all too familiar to our forebears, for its late-summer season, if not its causative reason.



*Louisiana and Texas Railroad locomotive and cars in 1880, typical of the trains that enabled the summertime exodus. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

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