

Transcript of “Mayor Walter Bowne and the NYC Cholera Outbreak”

Emily Hello everyone and welcome back to the Bowne House Historical Society’s podcast. My name is Emily and I am again joined by David. We chat about historical topics connected to the Bowne House that you might not yet know. So, David, could you introduce the topic for today?

David Of course, Emily! And thank you again for joining me. Today we are going to discuss Walter Bowne and his time as mayor of Manhattan during the cholera epidemic. There will of course be connections to life today, but I also want to remind everyone that Walter Bowne was married to Eliza Southgate who we discussed at length throughout March.

Emily Yes, and in one of our chats we discussed the yellow fever epidemic in New York City that Walter and Eliza lived through. It is rather incredible to consider Walter and his generation living through multiple epidemics here.

David Yes, so let’s hope history does not repeat itself.

Emily Oh I hear you, I agree! To start with, could you give us some background information on Walter Bowne?

David Of course. Walter Bowne was born in Flushing in 1770. And as we have previously discussed he married Eliza Southgate in 1803 with whom he had two children before her death in 1809. Later, he decided to become a politician and he was elected as a New York State Senator in 1816. He served for eight years, but the time we are most interested in today is his time as Mayor of New York City from 1829 to 1833.

Emily Yes, specifically today we are interested in the end of his time as mayor since he oversaw the outbreak of cholera in 1832.

David Yes, so the outbreak started in surrounding areas and to prevent it from reaching the city, Walter decided to enact a quarantine for all ships or carriages attempting to enter the city. This included all of the products and people on board. At the time, it was generally believed that cholera was spread through contact with an infected person.

Emily Oh we sure are familiar with quarantine. That is quite a way to connect with New York from almost 200 years ago. Oh I’m curious about what other measures they took, but let’s back up for just a minute because this is the second epidemic we’re

talking about concerning Walter Bowne. The yellow fever – what kind of reactions did he - and Eliza – and other New Yorkers tend to have, to having this outbreak?

David Yes, so, as we mentioned before on our previous chat, Walter and Eliza left the city at the time when yellow fever was worse, and they went to places in the country, like these springs, to bathe and to consume fresh water. And that was very common for New Yorkers to react that way.

Emily Wow that's amazing because that's just like today. A lot of people went to upstate New York and other places further out because of the cleanliness and also the water, everything was just fresher and there was more space.

David Yes, and so this cholera outbreak from 1832 is just the same; in fact about 1/3 of the city's population left the city to go to the countryside.

Emily Wow, that's amazing. Again, there are a lot of parallels to today.

David Yes. Absolutely. So on to the other measures that were taken at the time of the cholera outbreak. Unfortunately the quarantine did not fully work. But the government had decided to respond in a much more robust way than they ever had before this outbreak. And so one thing that they did was to take on an extensive campaign to clean the streets of New York. And I want to keep in mind how monumental a task that would have been. One; the streets would have been filled with animals, of course, most commonly horses, but even pigs and other animals would have been roaming the streets of New York at that time, and that includes all of the filth that would come with them. And also of course all of that cleaning would have been done by hand, of course they don't have the machines to clean like we would today. That entirely would have been done by hand. So keep that in mind, how monumental a labor task that would have been.

Emily Ok that's fascinating because what I'm hearing is that there were frontline workers even then; they just weren't called that.

David Exactly. So, that work would have been largely done by volunteers and they would have really put themselves on the front line, even though they didn't understand exactly how cholera was spread, this would have been a way that would have been possible to pick it up because of the contaminated food and water that they would have been encountering by having to do all of that cleaning of those spaces.

Emily Wow that's really tough, and there's no protections afforded them either.

David Yes, and, the society looked down on these people largely. The time period did not fully understand disease largely, and many people, particularly the wealthy class, would have seen disease as a moral judgment on the working class. So some of the people who would have been frontline workers, as we would call them today, would have been seen as having poor morals, and they would get the disease as a "sign" of having those poor morals, and so it's almost a judgment from God in the eyes of the wealthy class.

Emily Wow, that's really tough.

David Yes. I absolutely agree. And so, today, we know that cholera is spread through contaminated food and water, but since they didn't understand that at the time, they didn't fully have the preparations to prevent the spread. Interestingly enough, around that time many advancements were being made. Just after this outbreak they decide to create an aqueduct. The Croton Aqueduct was begun in 1837, and this would have provided New York City with fresh water, which would have been crucial in this fight against cholera. And unfortunately it doesn't fully prevent future outbreaks of cholera, there is another one in 1849. But it would have gone a long way to provide the residents of New York City with fresh water at a time that they needed it most.

Emily Oh wow. Well I have to think that it must have been a relief to the populace to know that the government was involved in changing infrastructure. So even if they didn't know the causes of cholera, the structures around them were changing, and that had to have made a difference.

David Oh – they were very excited about these changes! In fact, when the water arrived in 42nd Street on Fifth Avenue in that reservoir there, there was literally a celebration! People gathered all around to watch the water arrive because they were so excited to have fresh water in their neighborhood.

Emily Oh wow! I would have liked to have been there for that celebration!

David Yes I agree, that would have been fun.

Emily And that now is where the New York Public Library is.

David Exactly. It's in Bryant Park, right now.

Emily Oh wow. Wonderful. So this is very interesting. It's interesting to see how history repeats itself; but also to see what our forefathers did, and we can take strength in that.

David Yes, I agree. I take solace in knowing that I'm not the only one in history to have gone through something like this.

Emily Exactly. Thank you again for joining me, David. Please visit our website, www.bownehouse.org, to stay up to date on all our latest videos!