

Rachel Pérez

The Fever for Progress (and Research)

The research process has been particularly significant to my senior history thesis, “The Fever for Progress: Yellow Fever in 19th and 20th century Havana and Savannah.” It was through the act of researching that I arrived at the project’s theme. During the directed reading portion of my thesis, I decided to focus my research regionally on Cuba and thematically on healthcare and medicine. To help me narrow my parameters and develop a specific question, my faculty mentor, Dr. Reinaldo Román, recommended sources in person, through email, and through Zotero, a website which enabled us to create a group library to share, organize, and store sources and links. My attention was immediately captured by two sources in the Zotero library, José G. Amador’s “Redeeming the Tropics” and Mariola Espinosa’s *Epidemic Invasions*, both of which discussed yellow fever’s role in the U.S. occupation of Cuba during the late 19th and early 20th century.¹ My fascination with the pieces was solidified by their references to yellow fever epidemics in the U.S. south during the same period.² As a Savannah native, I had casual knowledge of the city’s history of yellow fever outbreaks and wondered at the former Georgian capital’s absence from my sources. In this way, I developed the driving challenge of my research project: interweaving Havana and Savannah history with yellow fever as a linking thread.

¹ Mariola Espinosa. *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow Fever and the Limits of Cuban Independence, 1878-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009).

² José G. Amador. “Redeeming the Tropics”: Public Health and National Identity in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil, 1890—1940. (PhD diss., The University of Michigan, 2008.)

Once my principal research objective was clear, I faced the task of finding an adequate number of relevant primary and secondary sources. One of the first aids I turned to in this pursuit was the UGA libraries. The search feature on the library website allowed me to locate scholarly works on medical and Cuban history in the Science and Main Libraries. Historical research depends on primary sources, which I found in UGA's Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, an impressive collection that includes reports and manuals penned by physicians active in the Savannah epidemic of 1876. I also utilized electronic history databases, focusing my searches based on region and time span. External search engines like Google Books proved extremely helpful for accessing primary sources that included government documents, travel guides, and medical literature of the period. During the directed reading section of my thesis, I contacted UGA librarian Nan McMurry, who provided an expansive list of potential sources. To have a more solid literature base for the Cuban component of my project, I used Spanish-language databases, such as Redalyc, through which I found secondary sources on Cuban medicine and public healthcare. My mentor Dr. Román introduced me to the National Library of Spain's digital database, where I found primary sources written by 19th century physicians and investors in Cuba and Spain. I pinpointed additional print sources through WorldCat and the UGA libraries website. These resources indicated that, in addition to pieces on yellow fever in Savannah, accounts of Havana outbreaks were held by the Georgia Historical Society, headquartered in Savannah.

I spent part of the winter break in my family home in Savannah and took advantage of the visit to execute more in-depth archival research. By using a search tool on the Georgia Historical Society's website, I arrived at their archives with a list of

sources I wished to view already prepared. A particularly valuable source at the GHS archives was records from the Savannah Benevolent Association, a charity organization that organized relief efforts during multiple yellow fever outbreaks. I discovered another cache of primary sources in the Archives of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Savannah, where I consulted with archivist Gillian Brown as well as Diocesan bulletin columnist Rita DeLorme, who had written on the 1876 epidemic's impact on Savannah's Catholic community. At the Diocese's archives, I examined the Catholic Cemetery's 1876 burial records and applied knowledge from secondary sources to recognize yellow fever deaths, even when they were not explicitly labeled as such. This errand was followed by a trip to the actual cemetery, where I located headstones of yellow fever victims based on the month and year of their deaths, as well as their year and place of birth.

After reading myriad primary sources by Savannah physicians, many of whom were also yellow fever survivors, I established familiarity with the yellow fever symptoms that are most perceptible to both infected individuals and witnesses. While these doctors' detailed accounts revealed genuine sensitivity to patients' suffering, the authors' studies were limited to very basic empirical observation that often seemed influenced by their emotional involvement in cases. Upon evaluating these sources, I grew increasingly aware of my own dearth of medical knowledge. I decided to address this gap by reviewing exclusively medical accounts of yellow fever. I was able to access literature from the library of a Savannah hospital to learn more about the virus's structure and the biological processes occurring in infected individuals, many of which were manifested in the same symptoms noted by 19th century healthcare providers.

The research "fever" brought me physically to archives and libraries in Athens

and Savannah and, I remedied my inability to travel to Havana with electronic archives, databases, and sources. I also found much of my material through the help of human resources, including librarians, archivists, UGA faculty, and fellow researchers. I cannot overemphasize the value of all these resources in enabling me to navigate spatial, temporal, and financial obstacles and access information that under different circumstances would not have been available to me. Through my project, I further gained experience executing research in the field of medical history, which entailed visits to libraries, archives, churches, cemeteries, hospitals and several resources operated by UGA. My thesis has been a melding of the old and the new, in terms of both subject matter and research methods. Rather than competing or undermining each other, these two sides of historical research have only reinforced one another and given me a more profound understanding of my topic, which in turn has allowed me to create a more accurate retelling of a specific moment in the human past.

Rachel Pérez – ABSTRACT

The Fever for Progress: Yellow Fever in 19th and 20th Century Havana and Savannah

Yellow fever outbreaks in late 19th century Havana, Cuba and Savannah, Georgia provide effective backdrops for examining the divergence of folk and professional healing. The epidemics both affected and reflected the demotion of certain religious and folk institutions to the status of outdated entities and concurrent elevation of biomedical science as a more modern and, therefore superior mode of interpretation. These shifting attitudes are seen in the standardization of medicine, refinement of biomedical rhetoric, and labeling of religious folk healing practices as archaic superstitions.

Besides yellow fever outbreaks, Havana and Savannah both experienced costly independence wars, reliance on the shipping industry, and considerable Catholic influence. The U.S. federal government did little to rectify the situation in post-epidemic Savannah, but seized on the Havana outbreaks as a means of demonstrating U.S. superiority and proving the necessity of intervention in order to bring modernity to the island. In both cases, civic institutions like the Catholic Church, the Savannah Benevolent Association, and *clínicas mutualistas* played significant roles in addressing the epidemics, particularly when governmental response was inadequate. These institutions faced the challenge of maintaining certain principles without appearing obsolete impediments to progress.

This project deploys primary sources drawn from the archives of the Georgia Historical Society, the Catholic Church, nineteenth-century medical literature, and military and government reports to offer a comparative account of the American “sanitation empire” from the 1870s to 1900s. The analysis reveals the role of religious and other non-state actors in modernization campaigns that are usually credited to the state.

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