

QUARANTINE IN NEW YORK: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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(Above)
Statue of Liberty with a face mask on due to COVID-19
-victorygirlsblog.com



The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought life as we know it in New York City to a grinding halt with the onset of Governor Andrew Cuomo's "New York State on PAUSE" executive order of March 22nd, 2020. With schools and non-essential businesses closed, New Yorkers find themselves in a quasi-quarantine state, as they are encouraged by public officials to stay home, maintain social distance, avoid using public transportation, and venture outside only for short trips of absolute necessity. If they are among the unfortunate who find themselves ill, they are subject to more stringent forms of quarantine, either self-isolation for periods of fourteen days or more in their homes, or in separate wards in our local hospitals where they are denied the comfort of visits from family and friends. A general threat to public health of this magnitude may not reside in the memories of New Yorkers during their own lifetimes, yet the threat of infectious disease, and strict quarantine measures are not new to this city's history. Here at the National Lighthouse Museum, New York's historical implementation of quarantine to prevent the spread of infectious disease is part of the heritage of our site. The grounds of the General Depot of the United States Lighthouse Service occupy land that once housed the largest quarantine facility in the United States: The Maritime Hospital of New York, known simply as, the Quarantine.

Before discussing the Maritime Hospital, it is helpful to understand that quarantine is formal public health strategy that dates back to the Middle Ages, although examples of civilizations isolating the sick from healthy populations in some fashion, can be found among ancient Roman and Chinese culture as far back as the 7th Century. Quarantine practice as we know it today was first exemplified during the European Plague: Venetian port authorities mandated that ships arriving from infected ports of origin, dock for a period of thirty days prior to disembarking. Land-travelers arriving at the port would be detained for an additional ten days; the term "quarantine," derives from the Italian, quaranta giorni, meaning "forty days." In 1403, the world's first maritime quarantine station (named a lazaretto, after the Christian Saint Lazarus) was constructed on an island off the coast of Venice.

As for the port of New York, quarantine practice has roots in the Colonial Era – first employed in 1663 to prevent entry of incoming ships in an effort to stem the tide of a Smallpox outbreak. In 1736, a six-bed quarantine at City Hall is opened (this almshouse would later be moved, becoming Bellevue Hospital, the country's oldest operating hospital). In 1738, the first maritime quarantine station was constructed on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor for the purpose of inspecting incoming ships into New York Harbor for signs of diseased crew and passengers. The island was turned over to private ownership from 1746 until 1755, when it was re-instated as a quarantine station from 1755-1757 in response to a Yellow Fever outbreak. In 1759-60, a hospital was constructed on the grounds, but in 1776, colonial insurgents burn the buildings on Bedloe's Island.



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The Marine Hospital at Tompkinsville, Staten Island was opened in 1799 to accommodate the port of New York's need for quarantine facilities. The Quarantine, administered by both the New York State and New York City Governments, was built on a 30-acre campus on Staten Island's North shore; at the time, the island was largely rural. With the influx of European immigration, by the 1840s, The Quarantine was treating more than 8,000 patients a year. The facility itself, bounded by a six-foot brick wall, consisted of a complex of separate buildings ranging its most prominent structure, St. Nicholas Hospital which looked out over the harbor and the descending grounds that included The Female Hospital (a two-story structure). In addition, the complex included the bayside Small-Pox Hospital which was divided into six-patient wards, federally owned buildings that housed harbor inspectors, and several free-standing wooden houses designated for the doctors of the facility. Brick houses also dotted the property, which provided shelter for the boat pilots, while several wooden shanties were set aside for the numerous stevedores whose task it was to unload cargo from the infected boats.

Since its inception, the Quarantine at Tompkinsville sparked controversy. Commercial and government interests supported the location of the facility, but local landowners were concerned about the values of their neighboring properties. In addition, local residents feared exposure to the infectious diseases that afflicted the ill residents within the facility. Although the residents were kept within the walls of the Quarantine, those who worked there would pass through the town raising concerns about the spread of diseases. These fears were heightened after several outbreaks of Yellow Fever and cholera in the community during the tenure of the Quarantine, leading to an effort to rid the island of this perceived public danger. Initially, this effort took the form of a public petition to move the facility off the island. (after a particularly severe Yellow Fever outbreak in 1848). The New York State Legislature passed an act in 1849 to move the facility to Sandy Hook, New Jersey, but the move was resisted by New York shipping interests and by the state of New Jersey.

Another plan to move the Quarantine to Seguine's Point on the other side of Staten Island, was thwarted when the newly constructed hospital facility was burned by arsonists from a neighboring town. A final legislative effort was made to move the facility in 1857, with no tangible results. By this point, tensions around the Quarantine at Tompkinsville had reached an apex, and the successful arson of the new hospital at Seguine's Point may have proven inspiring. On the nights of Wednesday, September 1st and Thursday, September 2nd, 1858, a crowd of rioters gathered to covertly evacuate and burn the Quarantine at Tompkinsville – to rid the island of the perceived threat to public health that the facility posed in the minds of the agitators. The conspirators, who claimed that they acted in self-defense, were later acquitted at trial.



(Above)
Marine Hospital & Quarantine Hospital, Staten Island
-pages.brownstoner.org



(Above)
"Quarantine Marine Hospital" burning down
-daily.jstr.org

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In the aftermath of the arson of the New York Marine Hospital, quarantine efforts in the port of New York would be located on smaller islands along the waterways of New York City. For example, the Smallpox hospital on Roosevelt Island (constructed in 1856), operated until 1875 at which point it was closed for overcrowding, and replaced by Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island. During the 1870s two islands, Hoffman Island and Swinburne Island, were built of landfill off the coast of South Beach, Staten Island for the purpose of constructing quarantine facilities to service the growing immigrant population. Bedloe's island was again designated a quarantine in 1884 by the New York State Legislature, though the island was utilized as a military installation for much of the 19th century. Note: Public health and military-uses aside, Bedloe's Island (later re-named Liberty Island) is of interest to lighthouse enthusiasts for its designation as the site for the construction of The Statue of Liberty in 1877 (The Statue of Liberty operated as the nation's first electrified lighthouse from 1886 to 1902). From 1892 through 1954, the South Side hospital complex also served the stream of immigrants that came through Ellis Island, providing further screening for infectious disease and other ailments.



(Above)
Statue of Liberty today
[-libertyellisfoundation.org](http://libertyellisfoundation.org)

Today, immigrants and travelers largely arrive to the port of New York via air-travel. Accordingly, the National Center for Disease Control (CDC) currently operates its New York quarantine station at John F. Kennedy International Airport. COVID-19, a form of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is categorized as an illness that may warrant quarantine according to the CDC. Yet, Kathryn Stephenson, author of *The Quarantine War: The Burning of the New York Marine Hospital in 1858*, reminds us that quarantine is a “blunt,” yet “effective” tool, often accompanied by fear and violence, and best utilized as a last resort. As New York City faces the current challenges of the pandemic through public health measures such as social distancing, sheltering-in-place, and self-quarantine, we are asked to slow down. While this is a challenging mandate for New Yorkers, the change of pace affords us all a rich opportunity to explore the history that surrounds us - perhaps the best place to start is the ground beneath our feet.



(Left)
“Bedloe’s Island” aka.
Liberty Island in 1877
[-archimaps.tumblr/](https://www.tumblr.com/archimaps)

BEDELOE'S ISLAND. On this island which is 1 1/2 miles southwest from the Battery stands the Statue of Liberty. The Signal Corps of the U. S. Army has its headquarters here.



(Right)
Ellis Island
[-thinkimmigration.org](http://thinkimmigration.org)

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*click on the links to read more!

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Article Design By Melissa Petraglia

