

Speaker 1:

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Ed Ayers:

From Virginia Humanities, this is Backstory. Welcome to Backstory, the show that explains the history behind the headlines. I'm Ed Ayers. If you're new to the podcast, each week, along with my colleagues, Brian Balogh and Nathan Conley and Joanne Freeman, we explore a different part of American history. Now, this is a special bonus episode we've put together for you and we're releasing it as we all adjust to the rapidly changing circumstances of a world devastated by COVID-19.

Ed Ayers:

A couple of weeks ago as concerns about Corona virus were mounting, we pulled together segments from a past show on the so-called Spanish influenza of 1918. Wondering why it's called the Spanish flu? Check out the episode in our archives at [backstoryradio.org](http://backstoryradio.org), it's called Forgotten Flu: America in the 1918 Pandemic. Since then, our studios have shut down. As we've continued work and recording from home, we've been thinking about how we can keep bringing you the history behind the headlines. Headlines that are dominated by the spread of COVID-19 and as we're recording this episode on Wednesday, the loss of more than 81,000 lives and the social, political, and economic upheaval caused by the virus. You might have caught Joanne, Brian and I on our Facebook live stream. We chatted about the historic significance of the moment that we're living in and if you want to go back and watch the video, you'll find it on our Facebook page.

Ed Ayers:

While we were searching for the history behind the headlines to COVID-19, we came across a fascinating if little known story about another public health crisis. Few of us had ever heard of.

David Randall:

My name is David Randall and I'm a senior reporter at Reuters.

Ed Ayers:

David is also the author of several books. His most recent is *Black Death at the Golden Gate: The Race to Save America from the Bubonic Plague*. Now, if you've had your fill of heavy news stories, don't turn off the episode just yet. The book's title might be grim, but it reveals the brave actions taken by some people charged with getting an outbreak of the plague under control. It's a story that can offer us some important lessons as we wrestle with our own public health crisis today. To find out more, I got in touch with David who spoke to me from his home in New Jersey and you'll have to bear with us. The connection wasn't that great, but the story David told me it's eerily prescient. To get us going, I asked David to take us to the setting for his book, San Francisco in the early 20th century. It was the city that David says was ...

David Randall:

The largest and most important city on the West coast of the US. It was the wealthiest, it was the largest, it was the most cosmopolitan and it really was the gateway for the country to the entire Pacific. You could sit on the Bay in San Francisco and you could see a ship coming in from Russia and you could

see a whaling ship coming in from Alaska and you could see a shift from Australia coming in. You can see ships from Honolulu and Japan and China as well. This was at the era when steamships and globalization were really coming into the forefront. Really was the meeting place that the world was San Francisco, and it was a place in many ways that seemed like the future.

Ed Ayers:

With ships arriving from all over the world. It didn't take long for the plague, which had broken out in Southwestern China to reach San Francisco. This was actually the same strain that had ravaged Europe 500 years prior in the 1300s. David says this outbreak of the plague started in the 1870s and in China, it killed some 10 million people in just five years.

David Randall:

The first known victim of plague in the United States was a man named Wong Chut King, and he was identified in March 1900. How long the disease had been in the city before then, is anyone's guess really. One thing that prevented a quick diagnosis of the disease and a quick response to it was that many Chinese-Americans didn't want to bring attention to themselves. They essentially didn't want to confirm all the negative stereotypes of here's a dirty foreigner who's going to bring diseases and shouldn't be here in the first place. There was rampant anti-Asian bigotry and in California. The mayor of San Francisco was name a man named James Fallon. He Eventually ran for the US Senate on a campaign that just said, "Keep California white." Anti-Chinese specifically bigotry, led to the first immigration laws in the US, which limited immigration from specifically China.

Ed Ayers:

It could hardly be more tension filled, and so I can imagine when the plague arrives with the turn of the century, that it really is alarming to people from all sides then. I want to focus on a couple people in your book, Rupert Blue and Wong Chung. Blue takes over efforts to curb the plague in 1901, before that, a man named Joseph Kenyon had been at the helm for awhile, so who is Kenyan and why was he asked to?

David Randall:

Kenyon was perhaps the most brilliant laboratory scientist in the US at the time. Kenyon was in charge of the quarantine station at Angel Island, which was essentially the Ellis Island of West coast. He was not able to do all the laboratory science, which had made him so famous. He was looking for a way to redeem himself essentially. He had read reports coming from China, from Honolulu in Hawaii, and he knew it was only a matter of time before plague would reach San Francisco as well. He was one of those people who was incredibly brilliant in the laboratory setting, but had no social intelligence. He almost had a knack for making people angry at them. He always thought he was right and couldn't ... And many times he was, but he can never convince somebody else to see his point of view.

David Randall:

He could never see how he could ever be wrong. When plague is first identified, there's a brief quarantine of Chinatown. It comes down fewer than 48 hours. People think immediately that this is just some hoax that it's the police department, or maybe it's the city health officials trying to find a way to get more tax dollars. Kenyon comes down and he recognizes, he identifies that a truly is plague and he tries to do everything in his power to stop the disease from spreading. He does incredibly aggressive measures. At one point, he tries to forcibly inoculate everyone living in Chinatown with what was called

the half [inaudible 00:07:29] serum. It was shown to prevent your chances of getting plague by about 40 to 50% for about six months, but it also had pretty strong side effects.

David Randall:

It gave you a high fever, made your body flush. It gave you chills, aches, so many people didn't believe it and they didn't want to trust it. He turned everyone against him. The Chinese started calling him a wolf doctor and started literally hiding the bodies of the dead. People within San Francisco said that he's ruining our reputation. He's going to ruin our economy. He's just out here for himself. The city newspapers, which were incredibly powerful at the time, turned against him. They started calling him suspicious, Ken Yoon. Then the governor turned against him as well. Then you had a state Senator say on the Senate floor in Sacramento that Kenyon should be hung for what he was doing.

David Randall:

Kenyon in a last ditch effort briefly quarantined the entire state of California so that nobody could leave the entire state unless they had a signed paper from him saying that they were healthy. This is when the federal government comes. California's congressional leaders go to the White House. They wrote their deal that Kenyon will be transferred away as long as the federal government pays for clean up of Chinatown. Kenyon is once again sent away, and as soon as he leaves the state, the feds [inaudible 00:08:50] on their deal and essentially, no one starts paying attention to Chinatown and let's it essentially continue to spread.

David Randall:

This was over the course of about eight to nine months. Kenyon knew the disease was spreading but he didn't know where or how. One big challenge was that people kept on saying, "You're saying there's a plague is spreading here, but you can't produce the bodies and you can't produce any living victims." One of the reasons for that was A, that the Chinese were hiding the dead and nobody trusted him in the first place, so he wasn't ever able to convince someone to try to help him provide treatment. Then the second thing was that no one knew why the disease was not spreading as quickly in San Francisco as it had in Hong Kong. Later, a doctor part of the US Public Health Service who was working on it, they discovered through this, that plague is spread by fleas on rats and the predominant flea in San Francisco is different. It's a different species than predominant flea in Hong Kong.

David Randall:

When the fleas in San Francisco would bite an infected rat and then would bite a person, they would inject less of plague bacterium into a person's bloodstream, than the equivalent flea in Hong Kong would. That small difference is all that prevented the disease from spreading as rapidly in San Francisco as it did in Asia.

Ed Ayers:

Wow, so things are in crisis in every dimension, but then this Rupert Blue gentleman shows up. Who is he and how does that change things?

David Randall:

Rupert Blue was another US Public Health Service officer, but whereas Kenyon was thought of as this brilliant person, Blue barely graduated medical school. He wasn't thought of as a genius by anybody. His

talent really was just that he was a really nice person. He was really affable and he could get along with people very well.

David Randall:

He comes to San Francisco and he knows that Kenyon is right. The plague is there, and that this is incredibly dangerous. He's trying to find a way to solve the problem in a way that Kenyon had failed to. Perhaps because Blue was ... Never had the same trust in himself in his intellect as Kenyon did, he's willing to try many things. Whereas Kenyon always kept his laboratory in Angel Island and was physically and socially isolated from Chinatown. Blue opens up his laboratory in Chinatown itself. He hires Chinese-Americans to work as translators on his team and pays them the equivalent, the same way we would pay anybody else, which was a radical idea.

David Randall:

He starts working on the kind of social bonds that Kenyon never paid any attention to. He starts walking Chinatown and meeting with people and trying to get them to trust him and believe that he's trying to work in their best interest. Lo and behold, soon that bears fruit. He starts to find living victims of the disease. He starts to chart more of what the death toll is and he's able to create a map of San Francisco and literally chart how the disease is spreading.

Ed Ayers:

Rupert Blue stood out in Chinatown. Originally from South Carolina, he was the son of a surgeon in the Confederate army. Blue was over six feet tall and he towered over most of his Chinese-American patients and colleagues. That included Wong Chung whom Blue hired to work as his interpreter. Blue knew little Chinese and many of the people he interacted with didn't speak much English, but they managed to find a way to work together and slowly but surely, Blue gained the trust of the community. It was a simple move that would change lives.

David Randall:

Blue really made the radical step to treat the disease not as a matter of race, but as a matter of biology.

Ed Ayers:

What dividends did this pay, this more modest approach, this more engaged approach?

David Randall:

They start to realize how the disease is spreading, who is catching it and they are able to actually start to understand what the next step needs to be. They're able to stop the spread of disease in Chinatown itself. Blue's briefly sent back to the East coast for something for another assignment. Then there's the great 1906 California earthquake, and that is when the disease spreads outside of Chinatown and spreads throughout the entire city. Blue comes back and he realizes that it's essentially the nightmare scenario for anyone who works in public health. You have an incredibly dangerous disease that is easily communicable. San Francisco is a city who has beaches, it has a downtown, it has stables, it has forests, it has pretty much every physical geography you can think of.

David Randall:

Blue realizes at this point that it's the rats that are spreading the disease. Once there is the earthquake, the rats are going everywhere because there's rubble everywhere. Nothing is really confined in one neighborhood anymore. He then takes another radical step and he starts focusing on sanitation and public hygiene. This was really the first time where a major American city said, "We're going to rip out all of our wooden sidewalks. We're going to put in concrete so rats can't burrow beneath it." He instituted street sweeping, which was a radical step at the time. Rat-proofing trash cans.

David Randall:

Blue quickly realizes that there has to be a joint effort to attack this problem. This is something that really is radical for San Francisco at the time too. It's a city built of people who are very individualistic, who have this idea that they are going to California because they're chasing fate and fortune, and they never really think about how their behavior could affect somebody else. It's only through joint collective action that the city focuses on rats and killing as many rats as possible. Blue, kind of showing his abilities as a social thinker and social intelligence, he speaks to anybody who will have him in every group. He speaks to the city's business leaders, he speaks to women's groups, he speaks to longshoremen, he speaks to kids, he speaks to everybody saying that the best thing they could do to save their city is to kill as many rats as possible.

David Randall:

Overall, the city within the span of a year or two, they kill something like two or 3 million rats in San Francisco that they track and every rat that's killed comes through Blue's laboratory and they search each one for plague so they can search and say, "Well, this is how we know where the disease is spreading and how quickly." The amount of rats they killed, something like five or six times the city's human population, they start understanding how a city can function in a different way. That is in many ways, what saves it.

Ed Ayers:

When it came to limiting another outbreak, Blue had a trick up his sleeve, one that had to do with battleships of all things and more specifically, an armada known as the Great White Fleet.

Ed Ayers:

As a celebration of American patriotism and military might, the Great White Fleet had been touring the seas and it was set to end one part of its voyage in San Francisco in 1908. There would be parades and celebrations, but only if Blue deemed the city safe enough.

David Randall:

That was the big essentially stick that he had over San Francisco that nobody wanted to take this effort to admit that the disease was there and that they didn't want to admit that all the myths built up around California, that this is a place, a golden land where you can remake your life and everything is wonderful all the time. The fact that bubonic plague is there doesn't really fit into the conversation very well. If Blue had that power to say, "If you don't take this effort, then I'm going to say the city's not safe for the breakaway fleet to come." It was always San Francisco's fear that it would lose its Naval presence to Seattle, which was not very far away and had an equally deep and broad port.

Ed Ayers:

Blue's tactic worked. Anyone who was reluctant to get on board with the sanitation campaign quickly changed their tune. With the support of influential people throughout the city, Blue encourage residents as well as public and private officials to help eradicate the city's rat population. This included everything from a bounty on rat killings, to investments from major corporations such as Wells Fargo. As the Great White Fleet approached the Golden Gate, Blue believed the best course of action would be to keep the ports of San Francisco closed, but there was too much at stake, so he granted the city a clean bill of health.

Ed Ayers:

The Great White Fleet sailed into San Francisco's port and was welcomed with fanfare and pageantry. Turns out though, Blue's gamble paid off. Authorities discovered no new cases of plague during the celebrations and by July, 1908, it had been six months since the authorities had discovered a victim of the plague. Although more than 150 people died during the outbreaks, Blue and his team managed to stop the epidemic and save countless lives. David Randall says this connection between the plague, the Great White Fleet and the economic future of San Francisco, well, a similar thing is happening today on a national, if not global level.

David Randall:

I think that's another analogy that you can make today is that the US is essentially shut down right now because of the fear of ... And we're kind of taking a hopefully a short term economic pain so that the economic pain doesn't last for years. They're trying to say, "We're going to take all of it at once and rip the bandaid off," as opposed to saying, "We're just going to let this wound fester." Hopefully, it works.

Ed Ayers:

Do you think that we learned lessons from the San Francisco trial or was that basically only looking back, we realize we're making the same mistakes again that so many people had made at the beginning of this story?

David Randall:

I think there are many lessons that we can learn from it. I think the problem is that many people don't know enough of about the history to look back to find out that we've essentially been here already. I think you can see a lot of the parallels and the personalities and in the response. One of the things that drew me to this book, I started working on it in 2016, it seemed like a very, very clear breakdown and clash of personalities at a time when this was all happening at a time when modern medicine was really coming into the forefront for the first time. This was the first time when microscopes and laboratories and people in white coats were thought of as a part of medicine.

Ed Ayers:

Yeah, they were beginning to discover that mosquitoes were the cause or the carriers of malaria, right?

David Randall:

Exactly, so Kenyon, he was really animated by the fact that his daughter, one of his daughters that died of diphtheria, which was at the time one of the most deadly childhood illnesses, and he worked in Germany with researchers who found the first cure for that. He really was of the mind that science was going to progress so rapidly that any death from disease was going to be a matter of time, and that would be a thing of the past.

David Randall:

The stories really shows that you could have all that brilliant hard science and that can fail if you don't have also at the same time, the soft science of convincing people and making them believe in you and trust. I think that's one of the problems we're running into today is that there's a breakdown of trust in many ways. People don't trust the numbers that are either coming out of China, or they don't trust the numbers that we're seeing of deaths, or maybe people don't trust what coming out of Washington, or they don't trust their own governments. There's just this black hole where people don't know what to do. When that happens, that's when societies kind of shows the parts where it was fraying at the edges.

Ed Ayers:

David Randall is the senior reporter at Reuters. He's also the author of *Black Death at the Golden Gate: The Race to Save America from the Bubonic Plague*.

Ed Ayers:

That's going to do it for us today, but you can keep the conversation going online. Let us know what you thought of the episode or ask us your questions about history. You'll find us [backstoryradio.org](http://backstoryradio.org) or send an email to [backstory@virginia.edu](mailto:backstory@virginia.edu). We're also on Facebook and Twitter @backstoryradio. Backstory is produced at Virginia Humanities. Major support is provided by an anonymous donor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, the Johns Hopkins University, and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. Additional support is provided by the Tomato Fund, cultivating fresh ideas in the arts, the humanities, and the environment.

Speaker 4:

Brian Balough was professor of history at the University of Virginia. Ed Ayers is professor of the humanities and president emeritus of the University of Richmond. Joanne Freeman is professor of history and American studies at Yale University. Nathan Conley is the Herbert Baxter Adams associate professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University. Backstory was created by Andrew Wyndham for Virginia Humanities.