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Outbreak in Washington, DC: The 1857 Mystery of the National Hotel Disease

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Outbreak in Washington, DC: The 1857 Mystery of the National Hotel Disease

Description

The National was once the grandest hotel in the capital. In 1857, it twice hosted President-elect James Buchanan and his advisors, and on both occasions, most of the party was quickly stricken by an acute illness. Over the course of several months, hundreds fell ill, and over thirty died from what became known as the National Hotel disease. Buchanan barely recovered enough to give his inauguration speech. Rumors ran rampant across the city and the nation. Some claimed that the illness was born of a sewage “effluvia,” while others darkly speculated about an assassination attempt by either abolitionists or southern slaveowners intent on war. Author Kerry Walters investigates the mysteries of the National Hotel disease. [*From the publisher*]

Keywords

National Hotel, James Buchanan, The National, Washington DC, President

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Comments

The introduction to Kerry Walters' book is available for download.

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It is now believed that not less than seven hundred persons have been seriously and dangerously affected by the National Hotel poison at Washington; and some twenty or thirty deaths have occurred in consequence.
—*the Pennsylvanian, May 27, 1857*

Beginning in early spring and continuing regularly through the summer of 1857, frightening rumors swept through the nation's capital and then, thanks to the still-newfangled telegraph, across the entire nation. It seemed that a mysterious malady had erupted in the National Hotel, one of the city's premier lodging establishments, not once but twice. This wouldn't have been especially newsworthy except for the fact that President-elect James Buchanan lodged at the hotel on both occasions, and that he and other dignitaries in his entourage were stricken. Buchanan was ill for months afterward, and four of his companions—a nephew, two members of Congress from Buchanan's own state of Pennsylvania and a states' rights "fire-eating" ex-governor from Mississippi—perished.

The presidential election of 1856, in which Buchanan bested two opponents, had been a particularly nasty one. The nation had been wrangling in an increasingly heated way over the issue of human bondage for years, but things had taken a dangerous turn, in 1854, with the passage of federal legislation that opened the westward territories to the expansion of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, as it came to be called, galvanized slavery's opponents as no other congressional act had, and within months, they put together a new political coalition whose

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James Buchanan, the drab career politician who became the fifteenth United States president and the most famous victim of the National Hotel disease. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

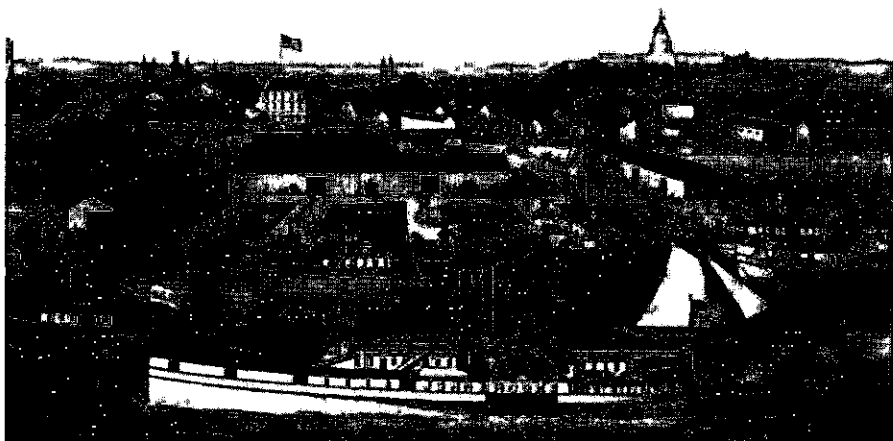


members christened themselves “Republicans.” A lanky lawyer from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln soon cast his lot with the coalition and vigorously campaigned for John C. Frémont, the party’s first presidential candidate. Buchanan was the nominee of the Democrat Party, whose members generally favored the expansion of slavery into the territories.

One of their own, Illinois senator Stephen Douglas, had actually written the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The third candidate in that 1856 race was ex-president Millard Fillmore, who ran on the American Party or Know-Nothing ticket.

The campaign rhetoric that election year boiled over with recriminations, accusations and dark insinuations that perfectly matched the angry national frame of mind. After the votes were counted and the winner decided, tempers continued to run hot. So when the news broke that President-elect Buchanan had fallen ill during his stay at the National Hotel, it was easy, given the distrustful post-election climate, for many to wonder if he had been poisoned by political enemies. That possibility alone was enough to strike horror in the hearts of some and glee in the hearts of others. Once introduced, the rumors of foul play persisted for months and, indeed, for years afterward, in some quarters. But as spring turned into summer, the poison theory gave way in most people’s minds to the alternative hypothesis that a frightening disease of unknown origin had hit the National and that it could be lying in wait for the rest of Washington’s citizens. The city’s mayor, backed by a handful of inedical authorities, did everything he could to scotch the rising panic. But for a few weeks, residents of the capital city, many of whom remembered a terrible cholera outbreak less than a decade earlier, were in a state of panic. Things only got back to normal when it became clear that the malady was limited to the National Hotel and caused,

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This 1863 lithographic view of Washington from the Sixth Street Wharf is pretty much how the city looked when Buchanan was president. The unfinished Washington Monument is on the left and the Capitol dome, under construction during Buchanan's administration, is on the right. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

so most of the scientific experts at the time agreed, by noxious vapors or “miasma” from backed-up sewage.

Today, the National Hotel disease, as it came to be known, is all but forgotten. The building is long gone, torn down in 1942, its old site on Pennsylvania Avenue currently home to the Newseum. The outbreak usually gets a passing nod from academic historians of this period of the nation's history, but it rarely shows up in popular histories and has never been fully explored by anyone. This is a shame for at least four separate reasons.

In the first place, the public response to the malady is a good case study of how easy it is for panic to spread. It's also yet another example of how eager people are to embrace rumors of conspiracy, often hanging on to suspicions of foul play long after it becomes clear that such suspicions simply aren't supported by the facts. Fueled by rumor, innuendo, half-truths, partisanship and incendiary journalism, distress over the origins and scope of the National Hotel disease awakened both panic and cloak-and-dagger excitement that, for a while, terrified and titillated the American public. As such, it belongs to the same lineage as the AIDS scare of the 1980s, when the origin of the disease was still undiscovered and rumors abounded that CIA-employed biologists conspired to manufacture the virus in order to target specific populations.

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Moreover, the National Hotel disease deserves attention as an example of how illness can affect the ability of the nation's chief executive to perform his or her job. There are, of course, other examples from the nation's history that illustrate the fact that a sick president is a national liability. After his 1919 stroke, Woodrow Wilson was never again up to the job of running the country, and Franklin Roosevelt's shocking decline of health in the final months of his presidency has been blamed by some for his apparent willingness to make too many concessions to Soviet premier Joseph Stalin at the 1945 Yalta Conference. Similarly, it can be argued that Buchanan's judgment was clouded by the lingering effects of the National Hotel disease in the opening months of his administration, leading to at least two political blunders, surprising for a politician of his experience and temperamental caution, which tossed fuel on the flames of an already fraught national feud over slavery.

In the third place, an examination of the National Hotel disease necessarily provides an interesting—and shocking—look at the sanitation practices and policies common in American cities in the mid-1850s. At the time of Buchanan's election, Washington was a metropolis of sharp and startling contrasts. Brand-new and stately marble government buildings stood side-by-side with ramshackle hovels. Roads were unpaved, pigs and cows roamed the avenues and ponds of open sewage befouled the atmosphere in the stiflingly hot summer months. There was no public sewer system to speak of. Household waste was generally channeled through aboveground ditches to empty lots, the Potomac River or the immense and noxious canal that bisected the city. Illnesses such as cholera and dysentery weren't uncommon, especially among the poorest inhabitants. Even posh establishments like the National Hotel were generally poorly ventilated, had badly constructed water closets and were dismayingly filthy.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the National Hotel disease offers a striking example of how a scrupulous medical investigation, employing the newest scientific theories and the brightest scientific minds, can be flawlessly logical but utterly mistaken. Over a period of months, individual investigators as well as boards of health weighed each piece of evidence that came to light about the possible cause or causes of the mysterious illness, rejecting them one by one until they concluded that the culprit was bad air or miasma rising from raw sewage. In doing so, they appealed to their day's most sophisticated explanation of the origin and spread of contagious diseases, an explanation that shortly, thanks to the work of luminaries such as Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, would be replaced by the bacteria theory

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of disease. The medical authorities who concluded that the National Hotel disease was caused by noxious fumes were breathtakingly close to the truth; they correctly pinpointed the origin—sewage—but were unable, through no fault of their own, to understand the means of transmission. They came up with the best explanation possible at the time. But they were wrong.

This book offers the first in-depth look at the National Hotel disease. The first two chapters describe the context in which both the malady and the panic over it were generated. Chapter one looks at the presidential campaign of 1856, one in which political rivalry was so bitter that it wasn't unreasonable to presume that an attempt might have been made on the president-elect's life. Chapter two examines the dismal public sanitation of Washington at the time of Buchanan's inauguration as well as the deplorable state of the National Hotel. Chapters three and four explore the nature of the disease, its effect on Buchanan, the panic that it raised and the different theories offered at the time about its origin. Chapter five examines the tenacity with which suspicions that Buchanan had been poisoned hung on even into the twentieth century. The appendix offers selections from contemporary newspaper and journal accounts of the illness. Written by reporters covering the story, victims of the illness describing their symptoms, medical experts weighing in on the causes and editors darkly insisting that foul play was at work, the selections make for fascinating reading and give a good indication of the extent to which the National Hotel disease rattled the nation during the first half of 1857.