

# Quarantine handbill leads to discovery and comparisons

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## Quarantine

[kwahr-uhn-teen]

noun: a state, period or place of isolation in which people or animals that have arrived from elsewhere or been exposed to infectious or contagious diseases are placed. Origin: from Italian, quarantina “forty days”

The first formal system of quarantine is reported to have been established in the 14th century by the Republic of Venice, trying to protect its lagoons. Ships believed to be carrying passengers with infectious diseases were required to lay at anchor for 40 days (quarantina).

*Writer's note: Dutchess County Historical Society's mission is to collect, care for and make available for study all things related to the history of the county. As the chair of the Collections Committee, I have the great pleasure of receiving all sorts of items, and enjoy researching the story that is told through each individual object. Often what seems simple and straight-forward at first glance proves to be more complicated and usually leads me on a historical adventure that eventually culminates in a much deeper understanding of the past and why the past matters to our present lives. Such was the case with a handbill entitled "Quarantine Ground – Staten Island," found interleaved in a folder of letters in the Hart-Hubbard Collection.*

Benjamin Hall Hart was born in Hempstead, Long Island in 1811, one of the six children of the Rev. Seth and Ruth Hall Hart to survive infancy. His family was educated and prosperous.

By the early 1830s, Benjamin had decided to take to the sea and there are numerous letters in the collections documenting his travels. Documents tie him to the frigate “McLelland” in 1832. He subsequently became a member of the crew of the packet ship “South America,” which was built in 1832 and was a sailing vessel in the Black Ball Line.

Established in 1817 with three ships, the line made regularly scheduled voyages between New York City and Liverpool, England. It was a 1st class ship and was said to be commanded by men of character and experience. The beds, bedding and stores were of the best quality.

By March of 1836, Benjamin had advanced to 2nd Officer of the ship and by July of the same year he was 1st officer. It is not known what brought his sailing career to an end, but on January 23, 1837 he writes to his brother Edmund telling him he had “been to Dutchess County looking at farms.” He saw one he liked three miles east of Poughkeepsie on

the Wappingers Creek, which included 189 acres, a stone house, barns, outhouses, stock and farming implements. The total price for all was around \$15,000.

He made the purchase and on October 18, 1837 he married Elizabeth Nichols in Hempstead and they proceeded the following year to relocate to the Dutchess County farm and establish a nursery and orchard that would become one of the finest apple-growing operations in the Hudson Valley for over the next hundred plus years. The house remains in the family.

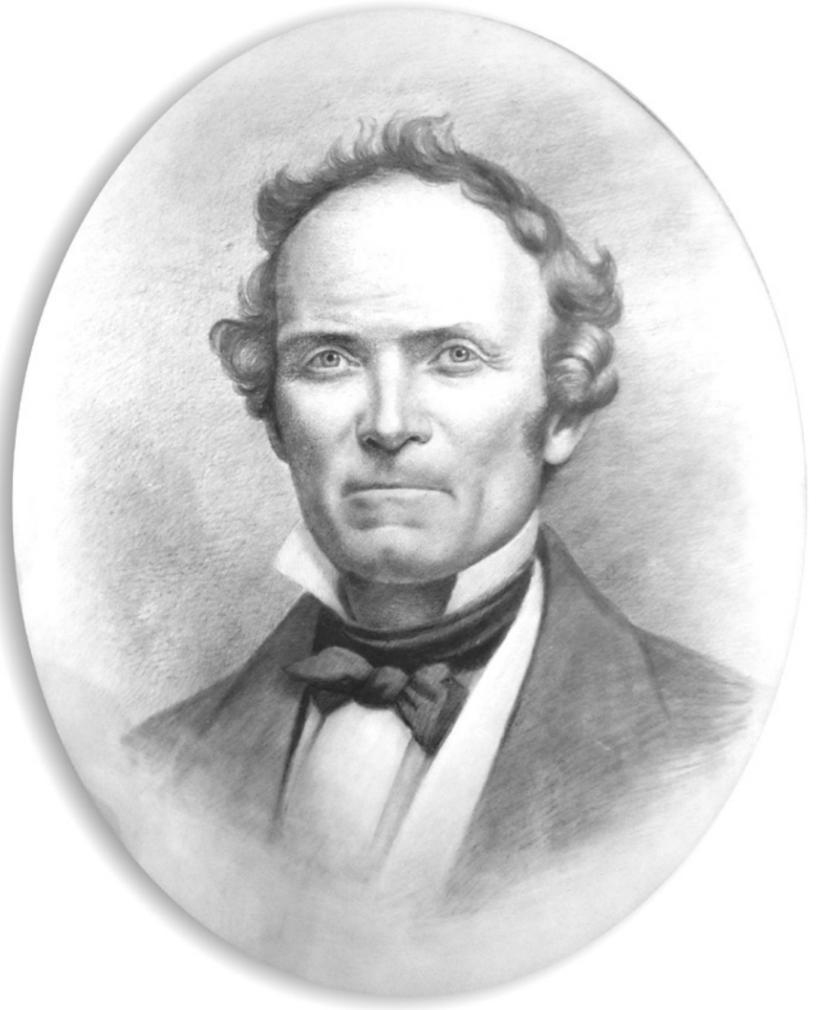
### Back to the handbill

So, what does this have to do with the handbill and why does it matter today?

It can be assumed that the handbill was Benjamin's. As it turns out, it was likely something every sailor was required to be familiar with as they sailed in and out of New York Harbor. Containing 16 “Rules,” it details what protocols were to be observed on board all vessels detained at the Quarantine Ground, Staten Island, and was issued by William Rockwell, who was Health Officer of the Port of New York between 1836 and 1840.

While today's pandemic has made us aware of the 1918 Spanish Flu, it was the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 that struck Philadelphia and left 5,000 people dead out of a population of 50,000 that began a nearly century long wave of recurring yellow fever epidemics that impacted other major cities such as Boston and New York City.

At the time, Philadelphia was the nation's capital and the epidemic forced President Washington and the national government to relocate out of the city. Two years later during the hot and muggy summer of 1795, yellow fever arrived in New York City. New York merchants tried to deny the problem fearing that even a rumor of the spread of the disease could harm trading, but as news spread, many New York City residents relocated to the bucolic Greenwich Village north of



Captain Benjamin Hall Hart, encountered quarantine rules as he sailed the ship “South America” between New York and Liverpool, England. DCHS, Hart-Hubbard Collection

the city.

New York City physicians formed a Citizen's Health Commission that demanded the quarantine of all vessels arriving from Philadelphia and residents were cautioned not to invite strangers into their homes.

In 1799, in response to the epidemic, New York State established a Quarantine Law that provided funding for the New York Marine Hospital and the creation of the Quarantine Ground, 30 acres of land formerly owned by St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.

The Quarantine Ground could hold 1,000 patients and at its peak in the 1840s it was treating 8,000 people annually. Health inspectors like William Rockwell, in addition to their annual salary, were paid an additional sum for each incoming vessel they inspected.

Never popular with the neighbors, resentment of the Quarantine Ground grew throughout the years until arsonists set fire to the buildings in September of 1858.

### Comparisons to 2020

For the past five months, the residents of Dutchess County have been called upon to respond to an infectious disease that seems at times to be uncontrollable. So were the residents of New York City from the 1790s through the 19th century until what is believed to be the last major epidemic of the yellow fever in 1905.

The handbill owned by Benjamin Hart that guided the operation of the “South America” as it came into New York harbor in the 1830s tells us that folks then were called upon to do many of the same things that are being advocated and practiced today.

Rule #2 – All persons whatever,

belonging to a vessel at Quarantine, are strictly prohibited from going on shore, except at the Health Office wharf, unless by permission of the Health Officer (social distancing).

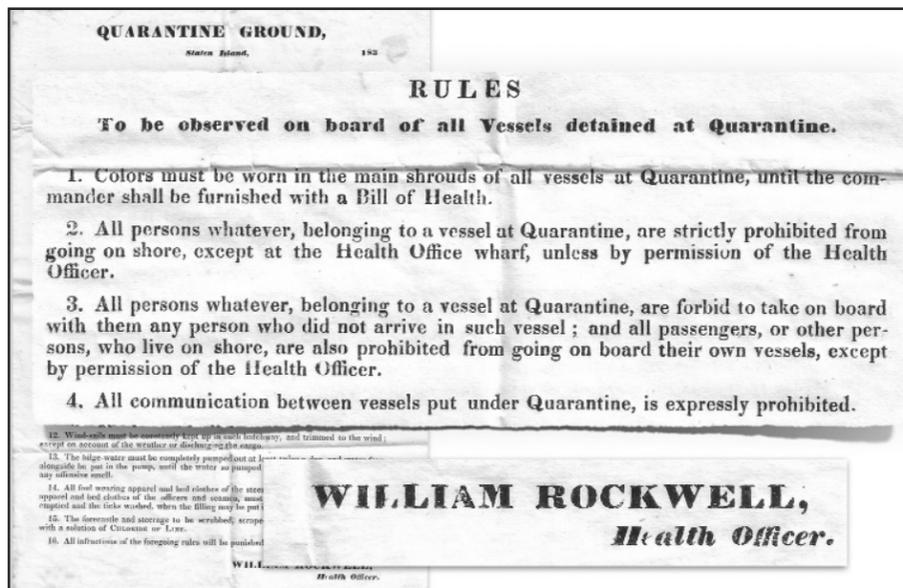
Rule #11 – Universal cleanliness must be preserved on board (wash your hands frequently).

Rule # 15 – The forecastle and steerage to be scrubbed, scraped, and then washed throughout, with a solution of CHLORIDE OF LIME (disinfect all surfaces regularly).

Then, like now - people were being asked to choose between public health and the economy; residents were fleeing densely populated cities for what they believed to be the safety of the country; everyone was cautious about who was invited into their homes; and people coming from highly infected places were asked to quarantine.

“What's past is prologue” – William Shakespeare. History does indeed set the context for the present. And Benjamin Hart's 1830s rules for quarantine in New York harbor remind us that past epidemics have challenged our country, but that every challenge has been met with resilient citizens and new scientific and social welfare systems that address the crisis. What will future historians have to say about what happened in 2020 and what documents will help to tell the story?  
 Only time will tell.

Melody Moore is a long-standing Board member of DCHS, Chair of its Collections Committee, regular contributor to the DCHS Yearbook, and develops a wide range of programs. More information can be found at [www.DCHSNY.org](http://www.DCHSNY.org).



A handbill issued by the Health Officer of the Port of New York sometime between 1836 and 1840, among the correspondence of LaGrange's Capt. Benjamin Hart, outlining quarantine rules, some of which have a familiar, contemporary “ring.” DCHS, Hart-Hubbard Collection

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