

CHOLERA COMES TO PIERMONT

Nicholas Gesner (1765-1858), a farmer living in Palisades, NY about two miles south of Piermont, kept a diary of which only the portion between 1829 and 1850 survived. The task of transcribing and editing some 1,600 scarcely legible pages was begun in 1958 by Alice Munro Haagenen. She continued until she reached age 100 (she died at 105) and later, the work was completed by her daughter Alice Gerard and published in four volumes in 2015.

Three terse entries in farmer Gesner's diary reveal a long forgotten calamity that occurred in neighboring Piermont in 1849:

Sept. 19: Died at Piermont last Night 5 with Cholera and 12 Cases said And at Petersons (near Jerry) a Boarder died little before 12 to Day - a few Days Ago 2 also at Piermont....Sickly in the place

Sept. 20: The Cholera Rages at Piermont, 3 died last Night

Sept. 21: It is said that 5 Deaths to Day at Piermont with Cholera.

Cholera “raging.” “Sickly in the place.” At least fifteen deaths! Today who knows anything about any of this? Standard histories of Rockland County don’t mention such an event and the only acknowledgment contained in the booklet *Piermont. Three Centuries* (published in 1996 by The Friends of the Piermont Public Library) is a phrase stating that obscure “church records refer to the number of church members who succumbed to cholera in 1849.” (p. 37) No further detail. Surely this arcane subject is worth investigating.

From early times there had been occasional outbreaks of smallpox, yellow fever and measles in Rockland County, but during the 19th century the most deadly scourge was cholera. America’s first epidemic of cholera began in June 1832 and by the end of that year, 3,515 people were dead in New York City out of a population of 250,000 (equivalent to more than 100,000 victims with today’s population.) More than 40% of

them were born in Ireland; as one intolerant physician wrote, “New York stands foremost as the grand focus and receptacle of the poverty and filth of Europe.” (C. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, p. 135) People of means fled to the country. According to the *New York Evening Post*, “The roads, in all directions, were lined with well-filled stage coaches, livery coaches, private vehicles and equestrians, all panic-struck, fleeing the city, as we may suppose the inhabitants of Pompeii fled when the red lava showered down upon their homes.”

Few medical men believed that cholera was contagious; most blamed the disease on miasmas (bad air) arising in poor neighborhoods. It was an era long before germ theory and the sanitation movement, a time when few bathed or washed, city streets were filthy, privies and drinking water drawn from polluted shallow wells, often near seeping cesspools. Acute dehydration and electrolyte loss could cut a healthy person down within hours and quarantine methods did no good because cholera wasn't transmitted directly from person to person or by animal vectors. Medical treatment was the usual: bleeding, emetics, opiates, etc. It wasn't until the 1880s it was learned that cholera was due to a bacterial infection which spreads primarily through water fouled by human excrement or ingested by eating unwashed fruits, vegetables or raw fish - indeed oysters from the Hudson were a favorite local delicacy. So the culprit wasn't bad air at all, but bad water — the bacillus could live in water for long periods of time but once swallowed, and if it survived stomach juices, its toxin would play havoc with the intestinal tract.

On July 3, 1832 Nicholas Gesner (NG) noted in his diary, *Cholera in New York. People moved out this last week, hundreds. Some vessels have Stopped Running. Sorrowful time.* All told, that year more than 100,000 “eloped” to pure country air and, most likely, some fled up river which contributed to the spread. (Although Piermont's pier wasn't completed until 1838, Taulman's Landing had been a center of river traffic since Colonial times.) NG provided more detail in the following entries:

July 6: *Many hundred families move from New York for to flee from the Asiatick Cholera. It began at Quebec and Montreal, crossed the Atlantic. It appears that it began there sometime in the first of January last.*

Aug. 31: *Cholera raged a few Days past in Closter. Several Died. Mrs. Bogert, in digging up her Sons cloths which were buried to wash them - she and a boy took it and both died. Cholera is now spread pretty much over all the United States. A Solemn Judgement [by God upon sinful mankind.]*

Sept. 1: *Robert Sneden poorly...with Bloody flux. Mrs. Chapman has Cholera in point.*

Sept 4: *Jacob Gesner's wife Betsy bad with Relax [described elsewhere by NG as bloody and Slymy excrement.] I got Away to go for Dr. Perry, little after 10 o'clock night. Dr. Perry came late in the night, intending to go to New York from Fort Lee and stopped and concluded that Betsy had the (Bloody) Dysentery.*

Sept. 7: *Piercy preached excellent sermon, yea extraordinary. Good number hearers, suppose about 200 hearers. Many out doors. Text Amos: "prepare thyself to Meet thy God."*

Sept 8: *A full house 8 or 10 Mourners...Oh! the tears, cries. The Lord present, we all on our knees praying to the Lord. Altho a mournful penitential time, yet what a Glorious time.*

The devout had little sympathy for the plight of the cholera-stricken poor. They believed the pestilence was due to poverty and sin - an angry "God's justice." Like with the flood and the plague of locusts, cholera was a means by which the Lord achieved moral purification. Its no wonder that church services were overflowing. Haverstraw's *North River Times* (1834) reported that one of the local victims (Judge Cowen) was "a man remarkable for his temperate habits and universally esteemed," but added that for every such estimable person affected, there were perhaps twenty more victims who are "addicted to habits of intemperance or uncleanness and are swept off." Or, as *The Rockland County Messenger* put it, cholera is "chiefly confined to the vicious and filthy." (August 10, 1854.)

After the “plague” of 1832 abated, sporadic cases recurred during the next two summers. Indeed on August 8, 1833 NG, himself, reported, *I was taken before Day-light this morning with Cholera Morbus.* (This was a term then used for cases of acute gastroenteritis usually appearing in late summer.) Two days later he was still *vomiting and purging* but within another week reported, *I am considerably better. My appetite is better. I use circumspection.*

In 1849, after a seventeen year hiatus, epidemic cholera (called Asiatic cholera) returned and, as NG had noted in his diary, this time Piermont felt the full force. In New York City more than 5,000 died, many of their bodies buried in a mass grave on Randalls Island. In June ex-President James Polk, three months after leaving office, died of cholera. Two weeks later (July 3) his successor Zachary Taylor declared a day of national prayer for “public fasting, humiliation and prayer on account of the malignant disease.” One year and one day after that, President Taylor, himself, developed symptoms of cholera - according to legend several hours after eating raw vegetables and a large bowl of unwashed cherries at the White House. He died five days later and afterward his hearse was drawn by eight white horses with 100,000 people lining the funeral route. The fate of Piermont’s victims that year was scarcely noticed.

Except for NG’s observations, the only surviving primary source that documents any outbreak in Piermont in 1849 is a typewritten history of the First Baptist Church which suggested that something ominous was at work. It noted that three church elders died of cholera that summer: Brother John I. Wilne, age 41, Deacon Adrian Onderdonk, age 38, and Brother John Gahanna who while “administering to the wants of a large number of families who were afflicted with the cholera, was himself called to fall a victim to its fearful power in his 63rd year.” How many more who were not church members were infected or died is unknown.

The next to last diary entry made by then 83 year old NG was on July 20, 1850, but just two weeks later a far more reliable chronicler of local events, the *Rockland County Journal*, began publishing as a weekly newspaper. In the first issue the editor

proclaimed that the paper would not indulge in “frivolous gossip” and vowed to provide “pungent, high-toned articles on the topics of the day.” So it was that five years later in 1854 when Piermont was gripped by another outbreak of cholera, an unnamed reporter went over to see for himself and reported back in graphic detail. (See August 5 and 12 issues, on-line, HRVH Historical Newspapers.)

RAVAGES OF THE CHOLERA IN PIERMONT

It becomes our painful duty this week to record the existence beyond a doubt of Cholera in Piermont. During the last few days, the most exaggerated rumors have been in circulation and in order to arrive at the exact truth, we made a personal visit on Wednesday among all the dwellings in the infected district. Although, as we anticipated, the case was not as bad as rumor has made it. still, we witnessed scenes that would make the heart of a stoic ache. The first probably defined case of cholera was that of Timothy Driscoll who was taken on the 22d of July and died. On the last Sunday, Timothy Cronan on the hill, was taken and died the next day. The same night his little daughter, about ten years old was taken and also his wife who died on Tuesday. At the time of our visit, the little girl was laying on a heap of old bedding on the floor with no one to care for her or heed her wants. The flies literally fastened to her eyelids. As we looked on the pitiful scene we could not help wondering where the overseers of the poor were....Up to Wednesday noon, eleven deaths had occurred from this cause and about twelve cases more were under treatment. The village Board of Trustees commenced the erection on Wednesday of a building to be used as a hospital selection for the site the ground near the river in the rear of Odd Fellows Hall (currently the Macedonian Baptist Church.) It stands about 400 yards from any dwellings, and obviates the necessity of carrying the patients any great distance. There seems to be a complete panic especially among the railroad laborers, and those who have no families are leaving the place with as much haste as possible. It is our opinion that the disease is not contagious, and we hope for humanity's sake, the citizens of Piermont will not shun through fear their duty, especially toward the stricken.

By the next week the situation had improved, although there'd been two more deaths.

PROGRESS OF THE CHOLERA AT PIERMONT

Since our gloomy record last week of the ravages of the dreadful disease at Piermont, we have paid another visit, in company with Dr. Hopson, Physician of the Board of Health, [James A. Hopson was Piermont's first physician] through the infected districts. Though we cannot, as we hoped, record this week the cessation of the frightful scourge, yet it has evidently reached its climax and a reasonable hope may be indulged that it will cease entirely. Were it in our power to convey an exact description of some of the scenes which actually occur during the prevalence of this pestilence, this would scarcely be credited. The idea of grappling with such a terrible visitor, surrounded with all the palliatives comforts which affection and wealth can throw around, is sufficiently terrifying but to see it in the abodes of the suffering poor, attended with want, destitution and desertion, is the very refinement of horror.

On August 19, 1854, one week after his second visit to Piermont, the same reporter for the *Rockland County Journal* reflected on what he'd witnessed and bitterly criticized the wealthy class who in his judgment had distanced themselves from poor victims:

They never enter the cabin of the afflicted lest their garments should be soiled or their reputations in certain circles depreciated. They can scarcely pass within a hundred yards of the abode of pestilence and poverty without turning up their dainty noses...and that is one train of thought suggested by Our visits through the cholera districts of Piermont.

Nothing more seems to have appeared in print about cholera outbreaks in Piermont either in 1849 or 1854 and the actual number of victims, especially among anonymous railroad workers, was never recorded. No doubt some good souls tried to help and

many years later (February 5, 1887) the *Rockland County Journal* reported the following:

*Dr. James A. Hopson, whose funeral was held last Saturday, was a resident of this village for many years, and at one time was the leading physician in our county; but through misfortune, for the past ten years his practice was very limited. **During the cholera epidemic of 1849 he was of great assistance to the poor people of this town,** and although he has not practiced of any account for the past few years, he will be missed by a great many who used to see him pass their door daily. The Doctor died of softening of the brain.*

Lacking additional primary source material, we can only speculate about the magnitude of devastation wrought by cholera in Piermont at mid-19th century. Nevertheless, any fair description of the village's history should be sensitive to the plight of ordinary people even as the contributions of civic leaders are celebrated.

MORE ABOUT CHOLERA AND PIERMONT

Although the outbreak of 1854 wasn't as severe as those that began in 1832 and 1849, his time southern and midwestern states also were hammered — more than 1,400 people died in Chicago alone. That same summer in London, Dr. John Snow discovered that the cause of a cholera epidemic there came from drinking water from a single public pump. Also in 1854, the causative bacteria *vibrio cholerae* was isolated in Italy, but its full significance wouldn't be appreciated until the work of Louis Pasteur in France in the 1870s and Robert Koch in Germany during the 1880s.

NG's scant observations in 1849 had established that a health crisis existed in nearby Piermont and because this transit hub seems to have been more effected than nearby towns, it seems likely that the water borne bacterium came from down river. At mid-19th century the village was going through a growth spurt with its population swelling to more than 2,000, many of them unmarried Irish railroad workers who were living in hastily constructed unsanitary quarters along the polluted *Slote* — outhouses emptied directly

into the creek where, no doubt, the workers washed themselves and their clothes. A booster writing to the *Rockland County Journal* (June 19, 1852) praised many new developments in the village, but described “shanties which will very soon be torn down and a neat row of cottages will supply their place.”

A familiar folk song dating from the 1850s, *Paddy Works On The Railway*, depicted the plight of thousands of Irish railway workers who fled the potato famine at home during the 1840s to seek refuge in America; one verse went, “And when Pat lays him down to sleep, The Wirey bugs around him creep, And divil a bit can poor Pat sleep, While he works on the railroad.” Work and living conditions were harsh, the workers frequently were exploited and abused by unscrupulous contractors and sometimes this led to violent riots which fueled nativist perceptions of the Irish as a rowdy and disorderly group. Context for what might have prevailed in Piermont can be appreciated by a tragedy which occurred in Malvern, Pennsylvania in 1832 where fifty-seven recently arrived Irish railroad workers died of cholera. Cramped living conditions helped to rapidly spread the disease through the work crew; those who didn’t succumb tried to seek aid from the larger community but were shunned. Fear of the spread of cholera with rising anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment in the wake of increased immigration created a situation in which these laborers were forced to suffer without any medical relief. It was as if they were an expendable race apart. The fifty-seven men who died in Malvern were hastily buried in a mass grave along the tracks on which they labored. (“Exploring Diversity in Pennsylvania History,” www.hsp.org)

During the 1840s and 1850s, Piermont was the busiest railroad terminal in the country; huge supplies of strawberries, dairy products, livestock, lumber and steel shipped 26 miles downstream to a terminal on Duane Street. Roughly ninety acres of land along the river bank, created from crushed Palisades rock and landfill, were crammed with terminal buildings, depots, two roundhouses that could accommodate 30 locomotives, a hotel, livery stables, repair shops, markets and dry goods stores. Conditions were chaotic with incessant din from clanging anvils, steamboat and locomotive whistles and smoke from engines and furnaces filled the air.

During the 1840s and 1850s the railroad's fortunes fluctuated. Six months after the first section of the Erie Railroad opened from Piermont to Ramapo (1841), the company was in bankruptcy and the workers restless; "Irish work gangs brawled among themselves or with smaller groups of Germans in drunken fist fights and rioting." (John Scott, *South of the Mountains*, Vol. 20, No. 3, July-Sept., 1976, p. 16.) In 1857, when its affairs again were in critical condition, a general reduction of wages was put into effect; 250 freight handlers in Piermont had their pay reduced from \$1 to 95 cents for an eleven hour day. When the men learned that the president of the line would not take a reduction in his \$25,000 annual earnings, they went on strike and everything ground to a halt — in four days 200 carloads of produce backed up. In order to protect the property and disperse the strikers, the sheriff of Rockland called for the Piermont Guard, who turned out with fixed bayonets and ammunition. When a hundred immigrants escorted by 25 policemen arrived by boat from New York City to replace the strikers, at first, they were driven off with some thrown in the river, but eventually the strikers were subdued and relative calm restored. For our purpose, though, the point is that in this tinder box, sanitation surely was not a high priority and unclean conditions were conducive for an outbreak of cholera. If wealthier people were less ravaged, it was not because of any superior morality but because their drinking water was less likely to be contaminated.

Published histories about Piermont at mid-19th century emphasize contributions of civic leaders, completion of the new pier, incorporation and renaming the village and the great day (May 14, 1851) when President Millard Fillmore, Secretary of State Daniel Webster and more than three hundred notables rode the first passenger train from Piermont to Lake Erie. However, the few existing primary sources from those exciting years suggest a darker alternative narrative. NG's diary and the local church records from 1849 and a journalist's eye witness accounts in 1854 had employed such terms as frightful scourge, suffering poor, panic among railway workers, shanties, destitution and desertion, deaths of church elders who tried to help, need for a cholera hospital. Some of this may have been overwrought but, clearly, everything was not celebration and

prosperity during Piermont's glory years — and it would seem that later writers of local history preferred emphasizing triumph to tragedy.

Extracted from “Medical Matters in 19th Century Palisades & Piermont” by Michael Nevins (mnevmd@att.net).

Principle Sources

The diaries of Nicholas Gesner were made available by the Palisades Free Library. Rockland County history texts and various unpublished accounts, including the First Baptist Church's records, were studied at Piermont's Dennis P. McHugh Library and the Nyack Public Library. The most detailed description of social conditions in Piermont at mid-19th century is local historian John Scott's essay “The Slote, Piermont and the Erie Railroad” in *South of the Mountains* Vol. 20, July-September, 1976. Some of that was based on a handwritten history composed in 1925 by Carol A. Pye which was found in the Piermont library's archives. Early newspaper accounts, particularly from the *Rockland County Journal*, were read on-line at the website of HRVH Historical Newspapers. Probably the best general reference to 19th century epidemics of cholera is Charles Rosenberg's *The Cholera Years, The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Univ. Chicago Press, 1987.) Special thanks to Alice Gerard, Marianne Leese, Grace Mitchell, Marie Koestler and Lara Jacobs for their assistance and advice.