



CHOLERA 1832

by Charles E. Rosenberg

New York, a vigorous city of almost a quarter of a million, had many concerns in the spring of 1832. She was the greatest port of the continent, one of the greatest in the world, and her leaders were busy at the wharves and banks, ensuring her continued eminence. Her score of newspapers divided their attention between the upcoming elec-

tions, the Indian troubles, and the tariff controversy.

But for New York, a city that faced Europe, there was disquieting news from

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across the Atlantic. The disease known as cholera had spread westward from Poland and Russia and, in spite of all precautions, had broken out in England. Quarantine restrictions seemed to be of no avail. As the summer of 1832 approached, it appeared more than likely that the New World would also be visited by the scourge.

In Europe the filth and poverty of densely populated cities seemed to breed the disease. Apprehensive New Yorkers took stock of their city and were not reassured by what they saw and smelled. New York was the largest, filthiest, and most crowded of American cities.

There were, for instance, the thousands of swine that roamed the city streets. Laws to control them were passed from time to time, but never enforced. Respectable folk, continually exasperated by the sight of the scavenging beasts, threatened to shoot them on sight. Nevertheless, the pigs were a necessity, for they represented the city's only efficient street-cleaning apparatus.

Citizens were required by law to sweep in front of their houses on certain specified days. Dust and rubbish were to be gathered into a pile, to be collected by the city. All well and good—but because of graft or inefficiency, this collection was usually neglected, and the decomposing mass of filth remained in the middle of the street.

Another glaring problem was the lack of an adequate water supply. New York City's water was a standing joke among travelers. Most of them were sensible enough not to drink it. Only the poor used the city pumps; those who could afford the expense had their

water imported from the springs and wells of the countryside.

For the city poor, maintaining any kind of cleanliness was almost impossible. Most lived in tiny, unventilated apartments. Often whole families—and perhaps a few boarders—occupied the same room. The most miserable lived in unfinished cellars, their walls a mat of slime after every rain. Houses adjoined stables, slaughterhouses, and soap factories. Their front yards teemed with dogs, swine, chickens, and horses. Such conditions were a virtual invitation to epidemic disease.

Cholera was a disease to strike terror to the heart. The symptoms were spectacular, strikingly similar to those of acute arsenic poisoning. Death might occur within a day or even within a few hours of the first symptoms. And those symptoms appeared with little or no warning. One New Yorker reported that he felt all right up to the very moment he pitched forward in the street.

New York's fears were soon to become a reality. On June 15 word came that cholera had broken out in Quebec and Montreal. The Atlantic—America's last great defense—had failed.

On June 21, at a special session of the legislature, a quarantine was established between Canada and New York. But few people really expected that the United States would long escape the fate of its northern neighbor. As everyone watched anxiously, cholera moved steadily south and finally reached New York City.

Late on the night of June 26 an Irish immigrant named Fitzgerald came home violently ill. The doctor's diagnosis was Asiatic

cholera. By the end of the week several other cases were reported. Although officials had not made these reports public, the fact that cholera existed in the city could hardly be kept secret, and panic began to grow. A mass exodus from the city had already begun. Carts loaded with household goods headed for the pure air of the country.

On July 2 it was stated publicly that nine cases of cholera had occurred. Only one person had survived.

By the end of the first week in July almost everyone who could afford to had left the city. Roads leading from New York were crowded with carts, horses, carriages, and swarms of pedestrians trudging along with packs on their backs. On many streets only one or two families remained. There was a deathly silence over all the city. Tufts of grass had grown in the little-used thoroughfares. Prisoners confined for minor offenses were released, for cholera had broken out at the jail.

The epidemic reached its height around July 20. On some days more than a hundred deaths were recorded, and it was common knowledge that many doctors did not even bother to report their cases. Cartloads of coffins rumbled through the streets to the cemeteries. Dead bodies lay unburied in the gutters, and coffinmakers had to work overtime to supply the demand. Harsh smoke from burning clothes and bedding filled the air, mingling with the acrid fumes of burning tar, pitch, and other supposed preventives. Houses stood empty, and there was an epidemic of burglary and vandalism throughout the city.

The first weeks of August brought a gradual but steady decline in the number of new cases, and it began to appear that the epidemic had spent itself. In the second half of August the refugees began to trickle back into the city. The epidemic smoldered on through the fall, and did not completely disappear until Christmas.

The high mortality of the epidemic in New York City attracted most attention, but few communities, however remote, escaped. Among America's larger cities only Boston and Charleston were untouched. Hastily dug graves in every state between Maine and Wisconsin bore witness to the extent of cholera's wanderings. It followed the army of General Scott against Black Hawk, killing white and Indian alike and spreading to Wisconsin and Illinois. So terrified were the Chicago settlers when it broke out that they left the shelter of the city, preferring to take their chances with the unfriendly Indians living nearby.

News of the epidemic filled the columns of newspapers all over the country. Local governments in every part of the nation received the abuse and indignation of citizens. For what town could boast that it was free from the filth and decay that invited cholera?

Increasing urbanization was a fact of life, and public health and medical science had to catch up with it. The cholera epidemic made this apparent. Thus cholera played a key role in its own banishment from the Western world. The great epidemic of the nineteenth century provided the impetus needed to overcome centuries of governmental inertia and indifference to problems of public health.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. In 1832 New York was the
 - A greatest port in the United States
 - B dirtiest city in the United States
 - C Both A and B

2. According to the story, the best street cleaners in New York were
 - A crows
 - B pigs
 - C rats

3. The main reason the city streets were filthy was that
 - A people refused to sweep them
 - B laws prevented any action
 - C the city did not do its job

4. The water provided by the city was usually
 - A available only to the rich
 - B unfit for human consumption
 - C imported from the country

5. Cholera was remarkable in that
 - A symptoms appeared with little warning
 - B death occurred very swiftly
 - C Both A and B

6. The legislature tried to prevent the spread of cholera from Canada by
 - A setting up a quarantine
 - B cleaning up the water system
 - C shutting down all major ports

7. When the presence of cholera was publicly announced, most wealthy people
 - A laughed at the report
 - B fled to the countryside
 - C bought large stocks of food

8. The epidemic reached a peak around the middle of
 - A June
 - B July
 - C August

9. The city where settlers preferred to face Indians rather than cholera was
 - A Boston
 - B Charleston
 - C Chicago

10. The story implies that the people most to blame for the epidemic were the
 - A public-health officials
 - B importers and exporters
 - C newly-arrived immigrants

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