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The Cholera Epidemic in Saint John, N.B., 1854

In 1854, Saint John suffered one of the worst attacks of cholera in Canadian history. Twenty years before, fifty people had died of the disease, but that had been long forgotten and the disease returned with all the force of novelty.¹ In the new epidemic, at least one thousand people died and contemporaries estimated that 1,500 of the city's 30,000 residents were killed.² While the exact number cannot be known, the epidemic was so devastating that for nearly fifty years afterwards residents dated events from "the year of the cholera."³ As the cholera ran its course, it pointed up weaknesses in the city government and inspired demands for reforms that would meet the basic needs of urban dwellers.

For twenty years, Britain and the Canadas had suffered intermittent attacks of cholera and in that time no great advances had been made in understanding the nature of the disease. There was no agreement among doctors on the question of how the disease was spread. In 1854 Dr. John Snow demonstrated that an outbreak of cholera in one district of London could be connected with the water supply from a particular pump and confirmed that cholera was contagious and that water fouled by the waste of cholera patients played an important part in the spread of the disease. While many were convinced by his experiments, the medical profession was not instantly converted to his views and it assigned water a place with other vehicles in transmitting the disease. There were many doctors who continued to argue that cholera was not contagious at all, but was caused by noxious effluvia, perhaps created by decomposition of refuse under the summer sun or by other local factors of soil or climate. The effluvia acted on those who predisposed themselves to the disease by undermining their resistance, especially by intemperance,

1 *The Courier*, 15 November 1834. In 1854, Saint John newspapers frequently referred to the Halifax epidemic of 1834, rarely to the Saint John epidemic.

2 Nearly 1,000 victims are listed in the "Records of deaths by Cholera in the City of Saint John and Parish of Portland." Mayor's Office, City Hall, Saint John.

3 Historicus, "Cholera in Saint John in 1854," *The New Brunswick Magazine*, III (1899), p. 232.

by improper diet, by self medication, or by giving way to unreasonable fear. The disease could be expected to take its heaviest toll, therefore, among the lower orders, the intemperate and the immoral.⁴

Before the epidemic in Saint John the majority of the medical profession in the city did not believe that the disease was contagious.⁵ The citizens were confident that the geography of Saint John was a defence against the disease. Saint John stood in an elevated position and was close to the ocean. The sea fog and ocean breezes were thought to clean the air, while the high tides agitated “the atmosphere in and around [the city], twice in twenty-four hours, to the height of twenty-five to thirty feet . . .” and guaranteed that Saint John “can never be a severe sufferer by that awful scourge of other countries.”⁶ The provincial government also accepted the idea that cholera was not contagious. Like other governments, it was encouraged to do so both by the weight of medical testimony and because a belief in non-contagion was politically more palatable. While quarantine was accepted as necessary for incoming ships from infected ports, and a quarantine station was operated at Partridge Island by the Saint John Board of Health, the measure was always unpopular with commercial groups. If one accepted that the disease was contagious, it was difficult to argue against demands for internal quarantines should cholera occur in a community in the colony. Such quarantines disrupted social and economic life and it was convenient to be able to refuse them on medical grounds, as the lieutenant governor, Sir Edmund Head, did consistently during 1854.⁷

With cholera raging in Britain in 1853 and intensifying in 1854, it was possible that New Brunswick would be attacked. Even non-contagionists believed that there were precautions that could be taken when cholera threatened. Head drew on the experience of the United States and Great Britain during the epidemics of 1849 to suggest what actions the city of Saint John might take. Cleanliness was the first defence against cholera. The city should be inspected, nuisances searched out and an “immediate cleansing” arranged. Pigs and other animals should be banned from the city. The disease could be contained, should it break out, by giving immediate medical aid to the sufferers, for most cases of cholera showed premonitory symptoms which yielded to treatment. House to house visits should be instituted to detect cases in the earliest stages and dispensaries should be set up to distribute medicine to the sufferers.⁸ In an epidemic there was much that a vig-

4 R. Pollitzer, *Cholera* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 1959) is the standard text on the disease.

5 Dr. W.S. Harding, interview with W.K. Reynolds, October 1898, New Brunswick Museum [hereafter NBM], CbI.

6 *Morning News*, 5 July 1854.

7 Provincial Secretary to James Mclauchan Esq., Carleton, 15 August 1854, Provincial Secretary's Letterbook, 1850-54, pp. 641-646, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [hereafter PANB].

8 Provincial Secretary to Mayor of Saint John, 20 April 1854, *ibid.*, pp. 595-597.

orous city government could do to check its progress.

There was much to be done in Saint John in 1854. Life was difficult that year. Preparations for war in Europe had created a demand for supplies that pushed prices in New Brunswick to record heights. The police in Saint John won a 25% increase in their wages after complaining that it was "impossible for the labouring classes of the community to support themselves upon the former rate of wages."⁹ While the shipyards were busy and there was prosperity, wages generally kept to earlier levels,¹⁰ and many residents must have suffered acutely from the rising cost of living. It became less likely than ever that the poor could maintain an adequate and healthy diet. The poor of Saint John were jammed into slums near the waterfront, in Portland and around Mill Pond. Many lived in lodging houses which were hopelessly overcrowded.¹¹ Few of the slum houses had any kind of sanitary arrangements,¹² and they were surrounded with filth and garbage in the streets and yards and even in the cellars. There were many small private slaughterhouses in the town and the waste from their operations mingled with the household refuse in the streets or was dumped at the Mill Pond which was "surrounded with an accumulation of putrid and noxious filth . . ."¹³ The slums were crowded and filthy, but dirt was not confined to the poorer parts of town. A newspaper pointed out that "directly in front of the Common Clerk's office there is a pile of official dirt which is truly refreshing to look at Nobody made it, of course We would suggest that the Board of Health [have] a scavenger pitch a couple of shovels full into each of the public offices and banks in the neighborhood."¹⁴

The few and defective drains and sewers which existed merely added to the filth of the city.¹⁵ The water supply was erratic and inadequate and the privately owned St. John Water Co. did not serve the poor. Many residents bought their water from itinerant vendors who sold it at two buckets for a penny, and did their washing with rainwater caught in cisterns or hogs-heads.¹⁶ They would have been safer had they drunk the rainwater. Most of the poor relied on water from shallow surface wells which were easily contaminated, as one contemporary pointed out, by washings from the Old

9 Petition of the Saint John police, 9 March 1854, Common Clerk MS. J-31, PANB.

10 Rev. J.W. Millidge, "Reminiscences of Saint John 1849-1860," *Collections of the New Brunswick Historical Society*, x (1919), pp. 126-127.

11 During the epidemic forty-five people fled from one such house which still remained crowded after they had gone. *Morning News*, 1 September 1854.

12 Of 132 houses inspected at York Point, 84 were without privies. Saint John Board of Health Report, 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

13 Saint John Board of Health, resolution, 4 September 1854, published in *The Courier*, 9 September 1854.

14 *Morning News*, 26 April 1854.

15 Committee Report, 12 July 1854, Common Clerk, MS J-32, PANB.

16 Millidge, p. 129.

Burial Ground and the “filthy washings of houses . . . the urine of inhabitants and animals (about five million gallons a year), dissolved manure of man and beast.”¹⁷ Conditions in Saint John were ideal for an explosive epidemic of water borne cholera and in 1854 the city’s residents discovered the filth in which all of them were living. If clean streets, clean water and safe sewers were among the proofs of efficient government, the government of Saint John was a failure.

Past failures might be partly offset by decisive action during a crisis. When the epidemic struck, however, the city council was slow to respond, for it was divided, acrimonious and bedevilled with false pride. The council was divided on a number of questions which often halted business. The mayor, James Olive, was a prohibitionist who refused to issue liquor licenses and much of the council’s time was taken up with long wrangles on this question. The unlicensed sale of liquor continued merrily; bars stayed open even on Sunday and one was reported to have done £25 of business one Sabbath. Drunkenness appeared to increase during the epidemic, and as drink was thought to predispose men to cholera liquor sales were regarded as a health hazard.¹⁸ There were bitter debates over the service provided by the St. John Water Co. and on proposals that the city buy out the company, but they did little to improve the water supply. False pride intruded when the council discussed means of enforcing the cleaning of the city. When it was suggested that councillors oversee the work in the wards some objected that it was “beneath the dignity of any member of the Board to be the Scavenger of the Ward.”¹⁹ The council never satisfactorily coped with the problem of cleaning the city.

Cholera reached Saint John on board the ship *Blanche*, from Liverpool, in mid-April. Amongst the passengers were a number of German immigrants who were described as being in a filthy state on their arrival. There had been deaths during the voyage and the passengers were required to go ashore at the quarantine station on Partridge Island. On 20 April, the lieutenant governor was told that cholera existed on the island and he ordered the staff there and the mayor of Saint John to take the necessary precautions.²⁰ At the station the normal procedures were followed. The sick passengers were separated from the apparently healthy and all were ordered to clean themselves and their baggage.²¹ After some time had passed, those passengers who were clean and appeared healthy were allowed to go on to Saint John.

17 Letter, *Morning News*, 16 March 1855.

18 *Morning News*, 19 July 1854.

19 *Ibid.*, 28 April 1854.

20 Provincial Secretary to the Mayor of Saint John, 20 April 1854, Provincial Secretary’s Letterbook, 1850-54, pp. 595-596, PANB.

21 Dr. Harding to Provincial Secretary, 25 April 18q4, REX/pa, Health and Sickness, box 2, PANB.

Exactly how long they were kept at Partridge Island is unclear, but on 6 May the government emigration officer reported that 277 passengers had been sent up to town and that 60 remained on the island. Those who remained were chiefly Germans, "who there seems no possibility of getting clean enough to send up."²² In time these passengers were allowed to leave for only one death, on 14 August, is recorded on Partridge Island.²³

For some time, passengers from the *Blanche* found their way to Saint John and took lodging in the poorer parts of town. Rumours of sickness began to circulate in town and it is possible that the disease was present before the first death ascribed to cholera took place on 23 June. When James Daley and his wife died on 27 June, the authorities admitted that cholera was present in Saint John. Daley was a policeman who lived on Mecklenburg Square across an alley from a house in which passengers from the *Blanche* were lodging.²⁴ His death was particularly disturbing to those who believed that cholera first attacked the intemperate and the immoral because Daley had a reputation as a careful and temperate man. Tales that he had been poisoned were so common that a post mortem was ordered to disprove the accusation and death by cholera was confirmed.²⁵

The last days of June saw few cases of the disease, but early in July the number began to mount and the disease raged through the city and surrounding neighborhood, reaching a peak in the first week of August. A great thunderstorm on July 30, which was welcomed because it cleared the air,²⁶ may have encouraged the spread of the disease by increasing the run off into surface water supplies from polluted sources. Cholera spread from the part of the town where the *Blanche's* passengers had lodged, northward to York Point and the area around the Mill Pond which lay between Saint John and Portland. Portland had its first cases in the first week of July and the disease made rapid advances there until the first week of August. Late in July cases occurred in Indian Town, a community lying northwest of Portland,²⁷ while in mid-August cases were reported from the black community at Loch Lomond north of the city. There the residents were said to have burned down the houses of the victims, along with all their possessions.²⁸ The epidemic declined late in August and the last deaths were recorded on 12 September. In Saint John a number of streets were hard hit, including St. Patrick Street, Brussels Street, Pond Street, North Street and Drury Lane. These streets

22 Emigrant Agent to Provincial Secretary, 6 May 1854, REX/pa, Emigration, PANB.

23 "Records of deaths by Cholera . . .," *op. cit.*

24 Dr. Harding interview, NBM, CbI.

25 *Morning News*, 28 June 1854.

26 Father Sweeney, interview with W.K. Reynolds, October 1898, NBM, CbI. The incubation period for the disease is about three days. See Pollitzer, *Cholera*, p. 686.

27 *The Gleaner*, (Miramichi), 9 September 1854. The record of deaths in the Mayor's office also shows the pattern of the disease.

28 *Ibid.*, 19 August 1854.

were notoriously dirty and crowded, with packed tenements set between slaughterhouses and tanneries.²⁹ In Portland the Straight Shore was badly hit and some lodging houses recorded multiple deaths. Ewing's house and O'Brien's house each had eight, O'Flaherty's five, and a number of others three or four deaths. At its height, the epidemic claimed forty or more victims a day.³⁰

In the face of this explosive epidemic, action was required of the Board of Health and the city government but both failed to act decisively. A Board of Health had existed in Saint John before the epidemic but it was replaced by one of twenty members newly commissioned on 17 May 1854.³¹ The new Board was large and unwieldy and as it often had difficulty raising a quorum few meetings were held,³² and when they were the members were tempted to put off making decisions.³³ In this, they followed the example of their predecessors who had begun to discuss plans for a cholera hospital as soon as the news of the *Blanche* was received but without result. It was a difficult decision to make because there was considerable opposition from the neighbours of any building chosen for the purpose. The opposition reached such a height that a reward was offered for information concerning persons who used violence against proposed cholera hospitals.³⁴ Not until 11 August was a hospital opened in a barn at Fort Howe in Portland which was intended to serve only those who had no home in the city.³⁵

It was August before the Board reached a decision on whether or not to issue daily reports of the number of cases in the city. Publishing reports did inform the citizens of the extent of the disease, but it might also alarm many and thus predispose them to the disease through fear. The lieutenant governor in his message to the mayor had recognized the danger that widespread publicity might provoke a panic and had advised caution, but the Board of Health's decision to withhold information on the extent of the disease did nothing to calm the panic. In the absence of official announcements rumour filled the city and the colony. In the third week of July stories circulated of ten people lying dead in Lower Cove on a single day. A newspaper said that the report was "ridiculous" but it showed the need for the Board of Health to issue accurate accounts.³⁶ The Board was slow to take action, but it was not inactive. On 27 July it issued a set of precautions against cholera, reprinted from those "issued by order of the General Board of Health, in England . . ."

29 *Ibid.*, 9 September 1854.

30 "Record of deaths by Cholera . . .", *op. cit.*

31 Minutes of the Executive Council, vol. VII, pp. 319-320, PANB.

32 *Morning News*, 21 July 1854.

33 *Ibid.*, 7 August 1854.

34 Provincial Secretary to Mayor of Saint John, 24 July 1854, Provincial Secretary's Letterbook 1850-54, p. 626, PANB.

35 *Morning News*, 11 August, 1854.

36 *Ibid.*, 21 July 1854.

The seven instructions included advice on treatment and on prevention. The cholera patient should be put to bed and heat applied by hot water bottles, sand bags and mustard plasters, "the object being to get him into a sweat." He could be dosed with laudanum and brandy. Prevention was best achieved through cleanliness and careful diet — no salad or fruits, no liquor for "drunkards and those who drink freely have been the first and greatest sufferers from the disease."³⁷ The precautions were put out as a handbill and passed almost unnoticed in Saint John. The editor of the *Morning News* complained that he had learned of the publication only when it was printed in a Fredericton newspaper and he doubted if one person in a thousand had seen the handbill in Saint John.³⁸

Dr. David Miller and Dr. Thomas S. Wet were appointed by the Board in mid-July to visit and give advice to the poor.³⁹ Early in August Dr. Carter was appointed at £ 3-10-0 a day to make house to house visitations and attend the poor. At the same time, Dr. Bayard prepared a cholera medicine which was left at a number of distribution points for the poor.⁴⁰ The house to house visits were not made diligently and one newspaper reported that some Board of Health members "stand in the middle of the street and hand the medicines into the house at the end of a stick, and give their directions through a speaking trumpet, holding in one hand a bottle of hartshorne. The great Boobies."⁴¹ The Board did, however, spend £ 1339 on medicines for the poor.⁴² The Board also attempted to alleviate the distress of the poor in true Victorian fashion by setting up a soup kitchen, hearing that it had had good effects during the epidemics in England.⁴³ Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the Board of Health was slow to react to the outbreak and only began to meet its obligations after the epidemic had been long established.

Where the advice of the Board required action by the city government, the results were equally unsatisfactory. The mayor did make money available to the Board, and the city itself spent money to meet the crisis, later submitting accounts for over £ 5000 to the Provincial government.⁴⁴ But, for reasons already stated, the city government was slow to act on the Board's recommendations that the city be cleaned and during the epidemic the press was filled with complaints of filthy streets, the reeking Mill Pond and the iniquities of landlords who were allowed to maintain foul alleys and pestilential lodging houses. There were some legal difficulties. The two problems

37 *New Brunswick Reporter* (Fredericton) 4 August 1854.

38 *Morning News*, 16 August 1854.

39 *Ibid.*, 7 August 1854.

40 *Ibid.*, 11 August 1854.

41 *Ibid.*, 18 August 1854.

42 8 February 1855, *Minutes of the Executive Council*, vol. VII, p. 406, PANB.

43 *Morning News*, 7 August 1854.

44 *New Brunswick, Journal of Ass embly*, 28 March 1855, pp. 280-281.

came together in the question of slaughterhouses. A committee of the council recommended that the private slaughterhouses be closed and a single public slaughterhouse erected outside the city. Even as it recommended the action, the committee recognized that the city might lack the power to force butchers to use a public slaughterhouse. Nevertheless, tenders were called, but proved too high. In the face of the legal uncertainty and the expense the council decided not to build a public slaughterhouse.⁴⁵ The inhabitants of St. Patrick Street, enraged by the lack of action, launched a demonstration on 20 July and threatened to tear down the slaughterhouses. Only with some difficulty was a riot averted.⁴⁶ The slaughterhouses continued to operate despite the wide recognition that they were health hazards. The council also failed to act where there was no legal uncertainty. The Dead House stood in the centre of Saint John near the jail. Private citizens and prisoners alike complained about the "pestilential vapours" that it gave out and demanded that it be closed.⁴⁷ The lieutenant governor himself recommended action on a petition by a prisoner begging that it be moved and noted that "the situation of the Dead House in the centre of the City close to the jail is most objectionable even in ordinary times but much more now."⁴⁸ The Dead House was neither closed down nor moved.

The city did increase the amount of labour available for street cleaning and it did arrange for lime to be spread in the gutters. It also resorted to burning barrels of tar at York Point in the hope that the fumes would dispel the noxious effluvia.⁴⁹ It is not clear from the record how long they pursued this course. While medically useless the procedure probably helped to calm some of the citizens who also burned tar or other material or set out chloride of lime so that the vapours "pour[ed] out of the windows like smoke [and] . . . the air was full of smoke and tar fumes."⁵⁰ In the more important matter of increasing the supply of clean water for all the residents the council failed. Not all public officials were as irresolute or confused as the Board of Health and city council. In the jail at Portland the jailer and the medical officer insisted on cleanliness and changed the diet of the prisoners to keep up their strength. Larger allowances of beef and bread were made and coffee and brown sugar were added to the diet. The jail remained free of cholera throughout the epidemic.⁵¹ Sweet coffee may not be a protection against cholera but the energy of the jail authorities contrasted sharply with the lethargy

45 19 May 1854, 16 June 1854, 30 June 1854, Common Clerk MS J-32, PANB.

46 *Morning News*, 21 July 1854.

47 *Ibid.*, 19 July 1854.

48 16 August 1854, Common Clerk MS J-32, PANB.

49 *Morning News*, 11 August 1854.

50 Lecture by Mr. Fenety (editor of the *Morning News* in 1854), delivered in 1893, "Linking the Past with the Present," NBM, SB23, p. 297.

51 9 September 1854, Report of the Gaol and Court House Committee, General Sessions of the County of St. John 1851-56, p. 314, PANB.

of other officials.

While some officials fumbled with the problems raised by the epidemic, the citizens shifted for themselves. The newspapers published recipes for cholera medicines, usually a mixture of laudanum, charcoal and brandy, but the commonest form of defence against the disease was the oldest one in threatened cities — flight. In July and August, the city became a ghost town. The dockyards were deserted and every part of town attacked by sickness was quickly emptied.⁵³ The extent of the depopulation was reflected in the wage rates; at the height of the epidemic laborers were paid £ 1 a day.⁵⁴ Even at these rates it was difficult to get help. One man remembered being sent by his father to hire a drayman one summer day and finding in the usually crowded Market Square “one solitary horse and dray, but no driver was to be seen.” Eventually he found the driver dead drunk under a tree, borrowed the horse and cart to do the work himself and returned them before the drayman awoke.⁵⁵ The ghostlike quality of the town was one of the most vivid impressions that survivors commented on forty years later. Henry Maher, who lived in Portland at the time, could walk to town along what was one of the busiest streets in the city in normal circumstances and pass fewer than half a dozen people. Perhaps the memories of abandoned streets echoing to the rattle of the cholera cart or “an express wagon . . . going along with four or five coffins and a man or woman sitting on top of them”⁵⁶ took on a literary flavour over the years but the flight from the city was real enough.

A contemporary report claimed that half a dozen wagons a day crossed the Hammond River Bridge loaded with refugees and their belongings, and the woods around the city were filled with the poor camping out, despite the rain and exposure.⁵⁷ Some residents fled to Fredericton on the river steamers, bringing the disease with them. There were demands in the capital that the authorities prevent “persons of uncleanly appearance from landing without a thorough examination. The furniture and bedding of such persons should at once be thrown into the river or burned.”⁵⁸ Twenty years before, the bedding of victims had been thrown into the St. Lawrence and had helped to spread cholera to the river settlements but that lesson, if ever learned, had been forgotten. The flight from Saint John led to attempts to set up legal internal quarantines and also encouraged violence.⁵⁹ The owner of the river

52 *Morning News*, 9 August 1854.

53 *The Gleaner* (Miramichi), 29 July 1854.

54 H. Maher, interview with W.K. Reynolds, October 1898, NBM, CbI.

55 C. Ward, interview with W.K. Reynolds, *ibid.*

56 Father Sweeney, interview, *op. cit.*

57 *Morning News*, 31 July 1854.

58 *The New Brunswick Reporter*, 28 July 1854.

59 Regulations passed by Carleton and Northumberland counties against the spread of contagious diseases were disallowed. Minutes of the Executive Council, vol. VII, pp. 337-339, PANB.

steamers was told that special constables had been sworn in at Fredericton to protect the boats which were "in danger of being destroyed by a lawless mob."⁶⁰ While many fled from the city, others refused to come in as rumours of the disease spread through the countryside. The weekly markets were deserted and the port came to a standstill. Masters of schooners and wood-boats which usually came to Saint John refused to bring their craft in during the epidemic.⁶¹ The natural consequence of the desertions was that the business of the city came almost to a halt.

The epidemic was a great blow to morale in Saint John. Not only was confidence in the natural safety of the city destroyed but also faith in the leadership of the city. The inadequacy of the Board of Health and the Common Council were exposed for all to see and it is significant that tales of responsible men abandoning their duties circulated widely. One woman claimed that the Roman Catholic Bishop Connally had given the last rites to a man "abandoned by all." A Protestant minister had spoken to the victim through the window and advised him "to read the Bible as he could do nothing for him."⁶² Perhaps that can be taken with a grain of salt, but Bishop Connally does emerge from the record as a man of unusual vigour in the crisis. The press praised the work of the medical profession, but one editor contrasted the efforts of other "leading citizens" unfavorably with those of Lieutenant Governor Sir Colin Campbell in Halifax in 1834.⁶³ The aftermath of the epidemic offered an opportunity for action to restore morale.

The disaster had left a large number of children orphans. Acting with his customary vigour, Bishop Connally began to take care of Catholic orphans during the height of the epidemic. He raised £ 500 for the support of seventy orphans and the next year was granted £ 226 toward the cost of their care by the Assembly.⁶⁴ If Catholics could take care of their children, Protestants ought to be able to do so. On 15 January 1855, the *Morning News* reported that at least fifty orphans had been housed in the poorhouse in August 1854. As that was an unsuitable place, especially for children from good homes, they had been boarded out when the Board of Health failed to establish an orphanage. Accusations were soon made that the children had been taken in not by those eager to act charitably but by those eager for cheap labour and pressure for a public institution increased.⁶⁵ A Bill to incorporate the St. John Protestant Orphan Asylum passed the House early in 1855, despite

60 Provincial Secretary to F.W. Hathaway, 1 August 1854, Provincial Secretary's Letterbook 1850-54, p. 634, PANB.

61 Paul Daley, petition 3 August 1854, Common Council MS J-32, PANB.

62 Mrs. McS., interview with W.K. Reynolds, October 1898, NBM, CBI. The interview is not more fully identified.

63 *Morning News*, 11 August 1854.

64 New Brunswick, *Journal of Assembly*, 28 March 1855.

65 Report of Public Meeting, *Morning News*, 15 January 1855.

some members' objections to the name.⁶⁶ If the epidemic encouraged the establishment of orphanages it did not lead to the setting up of a hospital. Many recognized that Saint John needed a public hospital but it was not until 1865 that one was established. Until that year the sick poor were housed in the almshouse despite the obvious dangers to the residents.⁶⁷

The epidemic did have a profound effect on the members of the medical profession, most of whom abandoned their belief in non-contagionist arguments. A study of the pattern of the disease in Saint John and of particular incidents in its progress seems to have persuaded the doctors to change their minds. The close connection between the lodgings of the *Blanche's* passengers and the first cases of the disease was telling. Equally compelling was the progress of the disease in the Poor House. It had broken out there soon after two cholera orphans were admitted. The first case was a "woman who had charge of one of the orphans."⁶⁸ Some commentators found it disturbing that the sexton who had buried many victims and a man hired to carry away the bodies had not suffered while women who washed the victims' clothes or laid out the dead were attacked and died.⁶⁹ If the disease was contagious why were the men spared and the women taken? These discrepancies can now be explained by the particular way in which cholera is transmitted; the need for it to be introduced by the mouth makes the handling of the soiled clothing and bedding of the patients particularly dangerous. In 1854 some doctors, including Dr. W. Bayard, were encouraged to continue to insist that predisposing and localising causes were necessary for the spread of the disease.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, when Dr. Harding polled the doctors of Saint John on the question, in June 1855, he found that twenty of them were contagionists and of the four who were not, "three were Bayards."⁷¹

Dr. W. Bayard was appointed chairman of the Board of Health which was reconstituted as a body of five on 14 April, 1855.⁷² He soon showed that his doubts about contagionist theories were not the signs of an obscurantist medical man. His first report showed a familiarity with current work in public health in England and included a demand that the Province begin to collect vital statistics. These had proved to be the essential basis of modern public health and were "the most important Sanitary measure ever adopted in England," allowing doctors to recognize the areas of greatest danger in any community. He also urged that the Province establish a hospital for the poor. He led the Board into preparing for a return of the cholera in 1855

66 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1855.

67 James H. Whalen, "The Nineteenth Century Almshouse System in St. John County," *Social History*, 7 (1971), p. 27.

68 Dr. Harding, interview, *op. cit.*

69 *Morning News*, 6 September 1854.

70 *The Courier*, 23 June 1855.

71 Dr. Harding, interview, *op. cit.*

72 *Statutes of New Brunswick*, 18 Victoria 40.

by appointing doctors to carry out house to house visitations and by nominating an apothecary who would keep his shop open day and night to provide medicines. The Board named a man to serve at the Cholera Hospital should it be reopened but did not spend money on the barn at Fort Howe as it was unsuitable as a hospital and ought to be replaced. As it turned out Saint John was spared from cholera in 1855, thanks to “the mercy of the Almighty and not to the precautionary measures of Man” Under the conservative doctor the board became a vigorous force demanding cleanliness in the city as essential to health.⁷³

One part of its campaign was successful, for the epidemic was followed by efforts to improve the water supply of the city. The provincial government appointed three commissioners to investigate the city’s water supply and sewerage.⁷⁴ The commissioners brought in a report which recommended that a permanent commission for water and sewerage be appointed by the lieutenant governor and that the city accept the offer of the St. John Water Co. to sell out for £ 29,000. The alternatives to accepting the offer were to ignore the Company’s charter rights or to set up a second water supply to which all would be obliged to subscribe and thus take away the Company’s customers, “an operation which however commendable on the score of economy, is not equally so on that of honesty and fair dealing.”⁷⁵ Having bought out the water company, the commissioners should connect all parts of the city to a regular water supply both for domestic purposes and as a fire precaution. The commission also recommended an extensive system of drains and sewers which, with the water system, would require an investment of £ 150,000 currency, to be raised in England and on the local market. The technical recommendations were buttressed by copious quotations from British reports and even from the writings of Charles Dickens. The report concluded: “impressed as we are with a deep conviction of the urgent necessity for the work, as involving the comfort, the health, and, it may be, the very existence of this community, we earnestly hope that no unwise economy — no timid misgivings, no needless fears of difficulties to be encountered — will prevent the accomplishment of this great undertaking.”⁷⁶

Part of the commissioners’ wishes were fulfilled. The Common Council insisted that the Bill drawn up by the commissioners be amended to allow the city, not the lieutenant governor, to appoint the commissioners.⁷⁷ Despite grumblings in the press about the cost, the St. John Water Co. was bought out and the commissioners proceeded with the plan. They repaired reservoirs, searched for new ones, laid mains in the city and within a year

73 Board of Health Report, 1855, MG9 A1, vol. 116, PANB.

74 *Statutes of New Brunswick*, 18 Victoria 5.

75 “Report of the Commissioners of Sewerage and Water Supply” 14 February 1855, MG9 A1, vol. 116, PANB.

76 *Ibid.*

77 *Statutes of New Brunswick*, 18 Victoria 38.

had brought water to parts of town never before served.⁷⁸ The speed of the operation may have been partly due to the emphasis on fire precautions, but the press was able to praise the commissioners for providing the poor with plentiful cheap water before the end of 1855.⁷⁹ The commissioners were much less successful in establishing efficient sewerage. The Common Council had rejected the investigating commission's scheme as "too vast, likely to be too expensive . . ." and to increase taxation.⁸⁰ The Bill as amended allowed the Commissioners appointed by the city to lay what drains they thought necessary and it was clear that they thought a more simple scheme all that was necessary. The kind of pressures against an extensive scheme which existed in the city were made clear in the months after the epidemic. Men who had spent money draining their own property resented being taxed for grandiose schemes to meet obligations others had avoided.⁸¹ Some refused to make the connection between bad drains and cholera but put the blame on "poisonous Brandy, fright, overcrowded apartments . . . filthy yards . . ."⁸² The better drained and elevated parts of town had escaped the worst of the epidemic; a sense of personal responsibility and of caution over spending public money increased pressure for a modest system of drainage and sewerage.

The consequence was that Saint John remained dirty. In the spring of 1855, Ellen Robb wrote to her mother from Fredericton that "In spite of all they suffered from cholera last year at Saint John, they seem to be doing scarcely anything to endeavour to prevent a return of it — the place is dreadfully dirty, yet they seem to grudge going to any expense to clean it. James was there for two or three days lately and he says it was as bad if not worse than he ever saw it."⁸³ The Board of Health led the demands for a clean city but its efforts ran into opposition at all levels of Saint John society. The Board appointed four inspectors of nuisances who were paid five shillings a day and ordered to wear a badge on their hats inscribed "Board of Health."⁸⁴ These men were known to the citizens as Health Police and as they moved around town they were abused, especially by the working classes.⁸⁵ The reasons were obvious enough. The Health Police presented people who kept dirty houses, dumped filth and nightsoil or kept pigs and the fines levied by the

78 *Report of the Sewerage and Water Commissioners for the City of Saint John . . .* (Saint John, N.B., 1857).

79 *The Courier*, 1 December 1855.

80 *Morning News*, 12 March 1855.

81 "One of many", letter, *ibid.*, 1 November 1854. Petition of property owners in Prince William St. against assessment for sewer, 20 December 1854, Common Clerk MS J-33, PANB.

82 "Prudence," letters, *Morning News*, 9 February 1855.

83 4 April 1855, Robb letters, Harriet Irving Library, UNB.

84 Board of Health Minutes, 26 April 1855, 1 May 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

85. Millidge, p. 131.

Board were heavy — a pound or two for each offence.⁸⁶ The poor had few alternatives to living the way that they did and they resented and defied the inspectors. They were successful, for twelve years later the Board of Health was still ordering pigs out of the city.⁸⁷

Private citizens at all levels defied the Board and it soon ran into difficulties with the civic government which alone could operate a permanent scheme of city cleansing. When the Board banned the dumping of ashes on the streets, which were used as a cover for “every *species* of filth . . .”, some of the city aldermen granted permission for citizens to dump ashes on certain streets in town.⁸⁸ The Board protested against the state of Flaglor’s alley where two hundred people lived in stinking apartments perched over “an enormous Cesspool and several privies flowing upon the surface . . .” Flaglor did nothing and after six weeks the tenants were ordered to clean up but left rather than do so. The Board therefore had the alley cleaned at public expense and then boarded it up. When the weather had cooled “enough to prevent the exhalation of effluvia from any filth that might accumulate . . .”, they reopened it.⁸⁹ Flaglor was able to persuade his tenants to petition the provincial government in protest against the Board and Dr. Bayard had to defend his colleagues against charges of arbitrary action.⁹⁰ Not that Flaglor was indifferent to public health. Late in 1854 he had complained to the provincial government that Saint John magistrates were not proceeding against the sellers of liquor contrary to law and the magistrates had been censured.⁹¹

The high point in the harassment of the Board of Health was reached when the Grand Jury criticised them for keeping a public nuisance. The Board had rented a piece of land two miles out of town as a place of deposit for nightsoil. When the ground became objectionable the jury seized the opportunity to embarrass the Board, although Bayard insisted that it was no hazard to health “and could only annoy those *seeking it* . . .” Despite improving the management of the place, the Board was forced to close it down.⁹² Whether from jealousy of political power or jealousy over property rights, the Board of Health not only received no cooperation in cleaning Saint John but ran into open hostility. It was many years before a survivor of the epidemic could say that Saint John was cleaned, well drained and well watered, and he gave some of the credit to the fire of 1877.⁹³

It is striking that Saint John seems to have recovered from the epidemic so quickly. At least one in thirty of the population had died, business had come

86 Board of Health Minutes, 2 May, 4 June 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

87 *Ibid.*, 8 March 1866.

88 W. Bayard to Provincial Secretary, 30 June 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

89 Board of Health Report, 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

90 W. Bayard to Provincial Secretary, 8 March 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

91 Minutes of the Executive Council, vol. III, p. 381, PANB.

92 W. Bayard to Provincial Secretary, 30 June 1855, MG9 AI, vol. 116, PANB.

93 Fenety lecture, *op. cit.*

to a halt for a short time, and a heavy cost in money and suffering had been exacted. Business quickly recovered and was better in 1854 than in 1853. Perhaps because the victims came overwhelmingly from the poorest and least skilled levels of society their loss worked no hardship on the community that contemporary commentators noticed. Outside their families, the dead were quickly forgotten. Only as a mass did they have any impact, and Saint John citizens were shocked, yet perhaps a little pleased, as are the survivors of many wars or natural disasters. The city's response to the attack was limited; an orphanage was set up, but no hospital; the water supply was improved, but no significant improvement made in cleanliness. It is the indifference to filth that seems at first most puzzling. Even some reformers could turn a blind eye to their own backyards. The Reverend William Scovill was appointed by a public meeting to a committee struck to negotiate with the city for an improved water supply and sewerage system.⁹⁴ Less than a year later he was ordered by the Board of Health "to abate forthwith the nuisance flowing from his premises situate [sic] in Morris Street."⁹⁵ Gilbert Flaglor could protest against illegal liquor sales yet allow two hundred people to live in squalid conditions. Many citizens protested public expenditures to meet private responsibilities or weighed the burden of civic debt against the alleged benefits of sanitary reform. Dirt was a fact of nineteenth-century urban life and the mere discovery of it, even in circumstances as dramatic as those of a cholera epidemic, did not guarantee that it would be removed. After anger against civic government for its failures in the crisis had abated, a minimum amount of activity satisfied most citizens. Indeed, strenuous sanitary activity ran into opposition from pauper and alderman alike. It would take years of effort to win the city of Saint John to a decision to keep itself clean; that decision required a redefinition of what was unacceptable dirt. The difficulties put in the way of those who began the process of redefinition should come as no surprise to a generation which in its turn is learning that levels of filth and pollution previously regarded as normal to urban life are medically and socially unacceptable.

94 12 September 1854, Common Clerk MS J-32, PANB.

95 Board of Health Minutes, 29 June 1855, MG9 A1, vol. 116, PANB.