

Margaret M. Phaneuf, "Sanitation and Cholera: Springfield and the 1866 Epidemic"  
*Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 8, No 1 (January 1980).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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# Sanitation and Cholera: Springfield and the 1866 Epidemic

by Margaret M. Phaneuf

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, urban America consisted of sprawling cities and adjoining slums. With the war over attention could finally be turned to social problems such as those caused by overcrowding in tenements and filthy streets. Disease was harbored in these tenements and health reform was much too slow in coming to most American cities. Springfield, Massachusetts, appears to have been one of the better prepared to combat the approaching cholera epidemic in 1866.

During the summer of 1865, cholera swept across Europe taking its greatest toll in England, France, and Germany. The arrival of the disease in North America seemed inevitable. That dreaded event occurred in 1865 when an English steamer, the "Atlanta," docked in New York Harbor. Sixty cases of cholera and fifteen deaths were reported on board the ship.<sup>1</sup> Although quarantine measures were enacted, the disease only took a short respite (while extremely cold weather briefly prevented its spread) before it took hold in New York and a host of other cities. The interim period provided New York City's rather slow-moving health board with an opportunity to begin formulating a new health reform program. Apparently that city and others had not learned their lesson when cholera had reached epidemic proportions in 1832 and 1849.

The residents of Springfield were very much aware of the approaching pestilence. Newspapers in the city reported the advance of the disease across Eu-

rope throughout 1865. Naturally, the fear increased with the news of cholera's arrival in New York City. The coming of spring in 1866 meant the approach of warm weather which would provide the perfect conditions for the disease to spread more rapidly. It was feared that cholera would soon be carried along the main waterways of the nation and eventually be spread throughout the country.

By the summer of 1866 news of the cholera epidemic appeared nearly every day in Springfield newspapers, focusing on the crisis in New York City in particular. These articles reported the number of new cases in that city to range from sixteen to twenty-four per day. Between July 27 and August 4, 1866, one hundred seventy-seven new cases were reported in New York City.<sup>2</sup> Daily reports of death tolls in other cities prompted one Springfield observer to remark that "the constantly increasing number of cholera cases shows what may be expected in a few weeks if the most effectual measures are not taken, and the people and the courts are now glad to cooperate with the city officials instead of working against them."<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, Springfield residents recognized that a spirit of cooperation would improve the chance of avoiding the spread of pestilence.

In the *Springfield Daily Republican* during July of 1866, it was noted that the outbreaks of cholera were worst among the "inmates of the reformatory and benevolent institutions, as well as in the Kings' County [Brooklyn area] truants' home."<sup>4</sup> Cholera appeared to be striking the same districts in New York as it had in previous years. It was also observed that "localities where numerous cases of lighter diarrheal complaints occur are selected a week later by the cholera."<sup>5</sup> But the disease was spreading rapidly and, much to the alarm of the public, "the victims are no longer confined to the poorest and filthiest of the City."<sup>6</sup> Springfield newspapers reported that in the first week of August the number of deaths in New York City had risen to over two hundred. To Springfield observers New York's cholera was, by far, worse than that of anywhere else in the nation, and newspapers expressed sympathy for the residents of that city. As reports from other cities such as Philadelphia, Savannah, and Galveston began to indicate similar conditions, Springfield's sympathy changed to deep concern that "the inevitable radiations from New York will soon appear throughout the country."<sup>7</sup>

Springfield, like many other cities, had been aware of the debilitating effects of cholera when the disease had struck the nation in 1832 and 1849. Newspapers in the city denied the presence of cholera in 1832, but some deaths were reported in the 1849 epidemic. In both years reports indicated that the disease was more serious in the neighboring towns of Chicopee and Holyoke.<sup>8</sup> By 1866, there was a keen awareness of potential economic effects of the disease in Springfield, which was a growing city dependent on industry and trade. However, an admission of the presence of a pestilential disease would have resulted in social and commercial isolation of any city. Further,

since cholera was associated with filth and squalor, an admission of its presence implied an acceptance of low social standards.

A lecture delivered to Springfield residents in 1832 in the wake of an epidemic had urged them to avoid panic, which would only help the spread of pestilence. It had been warned that "when a pestilential epidemic pervades some parts of our country, many a one is so terribly frightened as to 'die many times' before his real death by cholera, to which unbounded fear gives great susceptibility."<sup>9</sup> Thirty-three years later Springfield residents were advised that "fear and despondency are the great sources of danger in all epidemics, but more especially in cholera than any other," and all citizens were urged to "preserve a calm and composed state of mind and a cheerful heart, and to dispel all fear and employ a confiding trust in an all-wise and merciful Providence."<sup>10</sup> Obeying God's laws would theoretically bring deliverance from this scourge to the people of Springfield.

This piece of advice and a number of others more practical had their source in a very concerned staff of city officials. Springfield did not have a regular Board of Health in 1866. An ordinance of 1852 had established a health board of sorts, which consisted of a salaried "City Physician," the Mayor, and one member of the City Council.<sup>11</sup> An 1865 report from Mayor Albert D. Briggs indicated that the City Physician was appointed by the mayor to a one-year term, with the appointment subject to the approval of the Board of Aldermen. The duties of the City Physician included the "removal of sources of filth, or causes of sickness" from the city and the general supervision of the citizens' health.<sup>12</sup> These same obligations were seriously undertaken in 1866. Not until 1901 was a regular Board of Health established in the city.<sup>13</sup>

Springfield's City Physician was Horatio G. Stickney, a prominent resident who also had a brother and a brother-in-law in the medical profession, both of whom practiced locally.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the City Physician received an annual salary of \$75, lowest of all city officials.<sup>15</sup> Stickney's earnings above and beyond his regular salary in 1866, the "worst" year of the epidemic, greatly exceeded those of 1865. In 1865, he received only \$50 for "extra services," while in 1866, he earned an additional \$183.<sup>16</sup> Of course these figures do not include his income from his private medical practice.

In 1866 the debate over the cause of cholera and methods of prevention and treatment was continuing. Theories on its cause had varied from such ideas as "small winged insects not visible to the naked eye," to magnetic forces of extraterrestrial bodies, and to noxious vapors in the earth's atmosphere during the 1832 and 1849 epidemics. Lacking substantial scientific justification for the support of any theory, the debate in 1866 was primarily between contagionists and sanitationists. Comparison of cholera to other diseases, such as smallpox, cast doubts on the theory of contagionism, since cholera did not appear to be transferred from person to person. The fact that the disease us-

ually attacked the poor in slum areas where inadequate diets, overcrowded housing, and generally filthy living conditions prevailed lent support to the theory that environmental conditions played a major role in its spread. This brought about the advocacy of sanitation as a means of disease prevention.<sup>17</sup> Actions in Springfield indicate that those city officials comprising the health board favored the proposals of sanitationists. Horatio G. Stickney even went so far as to claim that "the causes of these diseases, being well and definitely known, every effort, however extensive, or however limited, for their removal must be followed by corresponding results, in the decrease of the diseases themselves."<sup>18</sup>

In the City Physician's report for 1865, Stickney saw the coming of cholera to the area as an inevitability and feared that the disease would be uncontrollable during the summer months. He noted that though there were disagreements about the cause and the methods of prevention of cholera, all agreed that it would hit hardest "the filthy, the vicious, the destitute, the indolent, the imprudent and the intemperate; and in those localities where pure water is insufficiently supplied and drainage and sewerage, etc., are imperfectly provided."<sup>19</sup> He then began his campaign against the disease.

Stickney also stressed the need for early treatment to prevent fatalities. He claimed that the disease was always preceded by symptoms of "languor" and "debility," along with diarrhea, and at that stage was almost always curable. If neglected, the victim would collapse from the weakening brought on by the diarrhea; at that stage cholera was almost always fatal.<sup>20</sup> Newspapers advertised a collection of "cures" for the disease, including "Hembold's Highly Concentrated Fluid Extract Sarsaparill," "Coe's Dyspepsia Cure," "American Life Drops," and "Dr. Blackwell's Syrup." Typical was an advertisement for "Stoddard's Cholera Specific" which read: "A sure Preventative and Cure for the Cholera. Its action is immediate and efficacious. Its virtues have been tested by thousands since the Cholera Season of 1849. Physicians use and recommend it. All admit it to be the best compound known for the Complaints for which it is designed."<sup>21</sup>

Another of the City Physician's recommendations called for temperance in all things, including eating and drinking, and all forms of physical and mental exercise. It was even advised that "too free use of tobacco, late nights, and late suppers, etc., should be avoided."<sup>22</sup> There was a genuine attempt to regulate the moral life of the residents of Springfield in order to maintain their health. Cleanliness was advised to combat cholera both as a prevention and a cure. Stickney suggested that residents daily sprinkle "chloride of lime" in privies and cesspools, and repeatedly whitewash the walls and fences surrounding them. He asked that each citizen survey his own property for sources of filth and impurity. If individual efforts would not be sufficient to clean the area, Stickney asked the people to notify one of the three members of the health board. He recommended that the city remove the "stagnant water in Ferry, Liberty, and other streets, and the removal of all filth and garbage

from about the tenements near the [Connecticut] River, and on Cross, Stockbridge, and other streets."<sup>23</sup> Springfield's City Physician was obviously aware that sanitation in some of the nation's largest cities was helping to prevent the spread of cholera.

There were many problems created by stagnant water throughout the city, but 1865 and 1866 were to be years of great improvements in Springfield's sanitation. Mayor Briggs observed that before the threat of the epidemic "less had been done in the department of sewers and drains during the past year than in any other."<sup>24</sup> The approach of the cholera epidemic, however, prompted the City Council to join in the efforts to promote sanitation in Springfield. Beginning in the spring of 1865 the drive was underway. At that time a plan to provide sewerage in several of the streets most needing it was submitted to the City Council. The plan was not approved because of a lack of appropriations from the city budget, but it was learned that "in many cases the proprietors of the abutting premises are willing to pay nearly or quite the whole expense if the City will go forward and do the work in a proper manner."<sup>25</sup> The mayor urged that the council agree to at least these revised propositions and authorize the construction since the citizens were willing to defray the cost. On sanitation Mayor Briggs felt that:

This is at all times a matter of vital importance in every City, and it assumes an unusual magnitude at this time when we are daily warned of the approach of a dreaded pestilence. Ferry, Cross, and other streets are fitted by location and condition to give the scourge, which is brought nearer to us by every gale from the east, not only a welcome but an abiding place. Every stagnant pool should be filled up and every receptacle of filth cleaned. The propriety of keeping swine or stalling cattle in the thickly settled portions of the city may well be questioned and in my opinion should be prohibited. The practice is almost necessarily attended with an accumulation of filth, noisome and dangerous to the public health.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed these recommendations seem to have been followed. The expenditures listed for the city of Springfield for 1865 and 1866 indicate that a great deal of money was spent on sanitation, and particularly on cleaning up the city's water supply. Sewerage construction was completed on Ferry, Cross, High, Union, Pynchon, Stockbridge, Maple, Mulberry, and Worthington streets in 1865-66. An aqueduct was built on State Street to supply pure water for the city, mainly for fire fighting purposes and for plumbing in public buildings. This cost the city \$2500 per year for a ten year period beginning in 1865. Some of the other major expenditures in 1865 for sanitation appear in the following list.<sup>27</sup>

\$55.00 to C.L. Shaw — building water closets at City Hall

\$226.91 to A.M. Knight — plumbing for water closets at City Hall

- \$63.00 to M. Houghton — watering and cleaning the streets
- \$77.91 to D.R. Craft — miscellaneous sanitation  
To the Highway Department
- \$1148.14 — building of reservoirs at Liberty, Lyman, Pine,  
Chestnut, Central, and Stockbridge streets
- \$883.00 — laying drain in Lyman, Main, Hampden, Fulton,  
Bridge, and Worthington streets
- \$299.38 — work on the Sanford Street sewer
- \$113.91 — laying drain in Court Square

The city did assume some of the financial burden involved in the new sanitation program. But to some Worthington Street residents who were assessed in 1865 for the construction of a new sewer in the neighborhood, the city did not assume enough of the cost. Mayor Briggs urged the people to be pleased with the new sewer since it was built with the intention of protecting them from the ravages of an epidemic.<sup>28</sup> Further problems resulted from the construction of new drains in Cypress, Worthington, Union, and Maple streets in 1865. Those “proprietors of the abutting premises” mentioned earlier who had promised to give their financial support had not done so by December of 1867, and the city was forced to assume the responsibility. This incident and similar ones forced improvements in sanitation to a halt, but only after the threat of a cholera epidemic had disappeared. The new Mayor, Charles Winchester, cancelled plans for the construction of a new drain in East Union Street in January of 1868, complaining of the huge debts the city had accrued in the previous three years.<sup>29</sup> Another important element in the battle against cholera was a thorough house-to-house examination for sources of filth during the spring of 1866. By the hot summer months the city (primarily the Highway Department) had removed most of the filth from homes and yards in Springfield.<sup>30</sup>

In 1866, Springfield had no public place where the sick could be cared for except the Almshouse, which was “for obvious reasons, very unfit for such a purpose.”<sup>31</sup> These obvious reasons were that the majority of the inmates of the Almshouse were either very young, old or infirm, and consequently highly susceptible to attacks from epidemics or any contagious diseases, and that nobody wanted to be placed there among the lower classes. The funds for the Almshouse came from a section of the city treasury called the “Pauper Department,” which was under the jurisdiction of the health board. While the actual expenditures of the Almshouse itself were not discernable, it is interesting to note that the Pauper Department spent much more in 1866, the “epidemic” year, than in the previous or following year.<sup>32</sup> In any event, the growing city could not go on being served by the Almshouse. The mayor declared in 1866 that “another pressing and growing want of this community is a public or city hospital . . . I know of no place of its size so destitute in this respect as Springfield.”<sup>33</sup>



### Springfield Almshouse

The Almshouse, as it was feared, was just the place where cholera first appeared in Springfield in August of 1866. An account describing the incident stated that:

... a man, his wife, and child arrived in the City at noon; in the latter part of the day the man was taken suddenly ill in the street and the whole family were taken to the Almshouse, where, in a few hours, the man died of Asiatic Cholera; the only case, I think, in the City during the year. Every precaution was taken to prevent the spread of the disease, which so far as the permanent inmates of the Almshouse were concerned, was successful, but the wife, after a short period of rest, went to Hartford, where, two days afterwards she died of the same disease, after an illness of a few hours. The imminence of the danger and the fortunate escape should lead us to take all necessary precautions to prevent a repetition of the danger by providing some suitable place where the sick and disabled can be properly cared for.<sup>34</sup>

Another report confirmed that this case, that of a "stranger," was the only case of cholera in Springfield during the period from 1865 to 1867. The report was that of the City Physician which named the victim as James Smith, age fifty.<sup>35</sup> City records projected a note of optimism. The mayor reported that "a kind and overruling Providence has kept the pestilence from our thresholds, and the elements under control, while many of our sister cities have



been visited with a terrible disease, baffling the skill of physicians and the care of friends."<sup>36</sup> He attributed this victory to the progress made in sewerage construction during the previous year and to general improvements in sanitation.

At first glance it would seem probable that there actually was only one isolated case of cholera in Springfield in 1866. Certainly a City Physician and a mayor so concerned with public health standards would have been aware of any major outbreaks. Reports for 1865 through 1871 indicated that the disease never took hold in the city. However, the *Springfield Daily Republican* confirmed that there was definitely more than this one case of cholera in the city in 1866. Though the actual number of cases was not stated, a few obituaries during the summer months suggested or stated cholera as the cause of death. One such obituary read: "Mr. Martinez, proprietor of the Maison Doree, died in this City today. It is rumored that he was the victim of a choleraic attack."<sup>37</sup> Obviously, if the disease had reached epidemic proportions it would have been played down by the newspapers to prevent a boycott of the city. But the fact that the newspapers did report a few isolated cases of the disease at the same time that city officials insisted that only one "stranger" had been stricken in the street is an inconsistency worthy of note. Three other factors suggest the same sort of discrepancy with city records. First, the incredibly high expenditures of the Pauper Department for 1866 (which included the Almshouse funding), second, the relatively high earnings of the City Physician for extra services in that year, and third, the recognition of the inefficiency of the Almshouse and the need for a municipal hospital might serve to justify the theory that the intensity of cholera in Springfield, though probably not extreme, was significantly greater than city records indicated. Dr. Stickney hinted at this when he reported that "of course the returns of the deaths do not indicate the full amount of sickness, suffering, and expense from disease. The greater proportion of the sickness which exists does not prove fatal. . . ."<sup>38</sup>

Improvements in sanitation continued until 1868 under the new City Physician, George S. Stebbins, and the new Mayor, Charles Winchester, who noted that "the lives and health of the citizens have been graciously preserved. No pestilential diseases have broken out in our midst."<sup>39</sup> But as the threat of an outbreak of disease diminished, so did the concern of city officials for matters of sanitation. By 1869, Mayor Winchester was proposing a reduction of city spending for such improvements and instead advocated tax assessment of citizens for individual projects. Apparently the "defeat" of the disease relaxed attitudes about health reform. The City Council, however, continued to propose plans for a municipal hospital or at least a dispensary to replace the inadequate Almshouse. In 1869 the city purchased two acres of land on Boston Road for the sum of \$10,630. A new hospital building was completed a few months later at a cost of \$2,455. The new City Hospital of Springfield was directed by the City Physician, staffed by local physicians, and it officially opened on April 3, 1870.<sup>40</sup>

With their attention still focused on their deliverance from epidemic cholera, Springfield residents became exposed to another deadly disease in 1869 — smallpox. According to City Physician George Stebbins, the disease was brought to Springfield on February 1, 1869, through “gross carelessness, if not criminality.”<sup>41</sup> This disease arrived quite unexpectedly, unlike cholera, and spread rapidly. It was not confined to any one area of the city, as the one hundred sixty-one cases reported were residents of “nearly every street in the City.”<sup>42</sup> While smallpox took hold in Springfield, it was reported to have been at least twice as severe in the neighboring towns of Chicopee and Holyoke. Again, an attempt at determining the extent of the spread of an epidemic in any city by using city records may or may not result in an accurate conclusion, especially in an era when disease was associated with filth, intemperance and low moral standards. Nonetheless, Springfield in the late nineteenth century was not only a city “spared by a merciful Providence,” but an exemplary forerunner in the utilization of sanitation measures as a successful method of disease protection in an age of limited medical science.

#### NOTES

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2. *Springfield Daily Republican*, August 4, 1866, p. 4, col. 2.
3. *Springfield Daily Republican*, July 19, 1866, p. 3, col. 3.
4. *Springfield Daily Republican*, July 8, 1866, p. 5, col. 1.
5. *Springfield Daily Republican*, July 8, 1866, p. 5, col. 1.
6. *Springfield Daily Republican*, August 6, 1866, p. 1, col. 1.
7. *Springfield Daily Republican*, August 10, 1866, p. 3, col. 2.
8. John E. Doyle, “The Epidemic Cholera in Springfield — 1832 and 1849,” *Historical Journal of Western Massachusetts*, III (Fall, 1974), 1-14.
9. Charles Ludwig Seeger, “Lecture on the Epidemic Cholera,” delivered in Springfield on August 2, 1832 (Boston, Mass., 1832), p. 4.
10. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 78.
11. William A. R. Chapin, *Wanted — Tall Men: The History of Medicine in Springfield* (Springfield, Mass., 1955), p. 95.
12. Springfield, Mass., *Laws Relating to Public Health in Springfield* (Springfield, 1879), pp. 4-5.
13. Chapin, *Wanted — Tall Men*, p. 95. See also Michael Frisch, *Town into City* (Cambridge, 1972).

14. *List of Springfield Physicians*, Local History and Genealogy Room, Springfield City Library, p. 27.
15. Springfield, Mass., *Municipal Register of the City of Springfield for 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 127.
16. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Treasurer, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 116.
17. Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Cause of Cholera: Aspects of Etiological Thought in Nineteenth Century America," in Numbers and Leavitt *"Sickness and Health in America* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1978), pp. 257-267.
18. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 91.
19. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1866* (Springfield, 1866) p. 77.
20. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 78.
21. *Springfield Daily Republican*, August 1, 1866, p. 5, col. 3, p. 5, col. 4 and p. 7, col. 4. August 4, 1866, p. 4, col. 6.
22. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 78.
23. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 78.
24. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 14.
25. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 15.
26. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 15.
27. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Treasurer, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), pp. 103-126.
28. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 16.
29. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1868* (Springfield, 1868), p. 9.
30. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 91.
31. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 22.
32. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Treasurer, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), pp. 21-22, *1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 135 and *1868* (Springfield, 1868), p. 117.
33. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 22.
34. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1866* (Springfield, 1866), p. 23.
35. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 90.
36. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 9.
37. *Springfield Daily Republican*, August 4, 1866, p. 1, col. 4.
38. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1867* (Springfield, 1867), p. 90.
39. Springfield, Mass., *The Mayoral Address, 1868* (Springfield, 1868), p. 9.

40. Chapin, *Wanted — Tall Men*, p. 141.

41. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1870* (Springfield, 1870), p. 96.

42. Springfield, Mass., *Report of the City Physician, 1870* (Springfield, 1870), p. 96.