

The greatest calamity that Perrysburg ever suffered was the horrendous cholera epidemic of 1854 that killed possibly as many as 200 citizens, young and old.

It all started following a Fourth of July celebration when people picnicked all day and attended a ball that evening. Suddenly cholera broke out and folks began dying from the disease.

Actually, it may have begun a day earlier on July 3 when a child named Jones, who was brought here from East Toledo and taken to the home of Stephen Williams (located where the Presbyterian Church now stands), died. The following day Mr. Williams himself died and the tragedy began in earnest.

From this beginning until seven weeks later, cholera raged in our town, carrying away as many as 13 victims a day and requiring brave volunteers to hastily build coffins and dig graves. The total number of people who died will never be known, for in the panic and confusion there undoubtedly were some deaths that were unrecorded with bodies quickly buried in private grave plots or elsewhere.

Known deaths totaled about 140, according to local newspaper accounts of the time. Judge Dodge, writing in February, 1893, on this subject, said "Transient persons found dead in the streets and vacant houses would swell the number above 200. The deaths were startling in their sadness."

And with ravaging sickness came the flight of over half of the town's

population of about 1,500 people. They scattered in all directions, even though an attempt was made to halt the spread of the disease by posting guards at the toll bridge to stop people from coming or going.

An excerpt from Thomas J. Webb's July 31, 1854 letter to his brother...

"The cholera in the "Burg" is very bad at present. When I left it, it was nearly deserted. It has taken off some of our best citizens.

The number of deaths in the "Burg" that I can number amounts to about "60", among which are Aunt Rebecca McKnight, Mrs. Irwin & her daughter Julia and one other child, Wealthy Gates, Mrs. Abner Brown, Esq. Huntington Jarvis Spafford, John J. Spink and sister, Wm. Cousser, Dr. Robinson, Peter Laney, Deacon Williams and I suppose a great many more since I left.

Oh yes, I forgot J. W. Ross and J. A. Hall's wife. You have no idea how the town looks. Business of all kinds has stopped. The stores have shut up. The streets are all deserted and you may walk from one end of town to the other and not meet over 3 or 4 persons. It looks worse than any Sunday I ever saw there in my life The citizens of the town are panic stricken for the reason that it is a disease which has never visited our town before and so few cases are cured. The doctors no doubt do the best they know how but they effect every few cures. When I left town I

did not know of but 3 or 4 that had been cured.

This malady will make a great change in Perrysburg. It makes a person feel sad to go into the Cemetery and see the new graves that have been dug during the month of July 1854. The first case occurred on the 2nd of July. Just think of it. In the "Burg", which is considered as healthy as any town in the state, there has been more dead during the present month than have died in it for the last 3 or 4 years."

Business came to a standstill, both from choice and necessity. Virtually all stores closed and locked their doors during those terrible seven weeks. Even the local newspaper stopped publishing for the lack of employees.

People were so terrified of the disease that many wouldn't even touch their own family victims while they were alive or dead. The parents and a daughter of one family on Pine Street contracted the disease and died, leaving two other little girls. They survived, thanks to neighbors who fed them out of pity through their back doors.

Another story tells of a little child taken ill who was put in a bed in a room and her family left the house, coming back occasionally to look at her through a window. The child died and was buried by the neighbors when the parents left town.

The medical profession of the mid-1800s didn't know how to deal with this dread disease. They weren't even sure what caused it. Many thought it was

from some kind of poisoned air due to decaying mineral and vegetable matter.

The symptoms included vomiting, cramps and diarrhea. A stricken person could wake up feeling only slightly ill and be dead by evening. One observer noted that several people just keeled over in the street while going about their daily chores.

There were only about two doctors in Perrysburg then, Dr. Erasmus D. Peck and his new assistant, Dr. James Robertson. They bravely did everything known to help and comfort the sick. For all his efforts, Dr. Robertson himself fell ill and died. Both physicians were later honored as heroes and Dr. Peck, who went on to become a United States Congressman was awarded \$40 as a gift of appreciation from the village...\$40 was obviously worth a lot more than it is now.

By August 12 the Perrysburg Journal resumed printing and reported the dreadful disease had almost subsided. The town took stock of the situation and noted the loss of a number of prominent citizens, among them the superintendent of schools, the proprietor of the Exchange Hotel, the wife of one of our best known attorneys, one or two merchants and their wives or children, and of course, Dr. Robertson.

Most of them were buried in the southeast corner of Fort Meigs Union Cemetery at the corner of State Routes 25 and 65.

In 1854, cholera was commonly thought to be transmitted through inhalation of contaminated vapors. Dr. John

Snow, a London physician, was the first to identify that contaminated drinking water was the method by which the disease was transmitted. In London's 1854 Cholera Epidemic, he demonstrated how cases of cholera that broke out in a district of central London could all be traced to a single source of contaminated drinking water, the "Broad Street Pump". After the town fathers removed the pump handle cutting off the source of contamination, cholera deaths immediately dropped to zero in the affected area.

Cholera, sometimes known as Asiatic cholera or epidemic cholera, is an infectious gastroenteritis caused by the bacterium *vibrio cholera*. In its most severe forms, cholera is one of the most rapidly fatal illnesses known, and a perfectly healthy person may become hypotensive within an hour of the onset of symptoms; infected patients may die within three hours if treatment is not provided. In a common scenario, the disease progresses from the first symptoms to shock in 4 to 12 hours, with death following in 18 hours to several days without oral rehydration therapy.

Things You Should Know About Perrysburg, Ohio

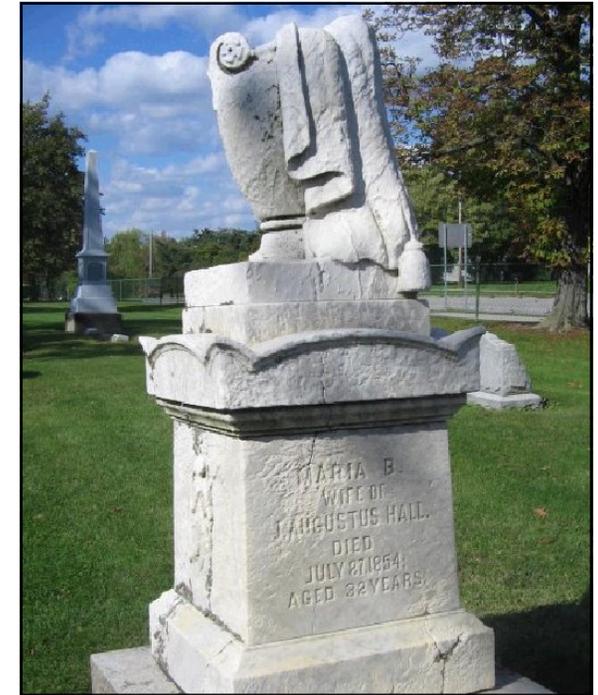
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CHOLERA The 1854 Epidemic



Grave of cholera victim Mrs. J. A. Hall, died July 27, 1854 at age 22 years

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