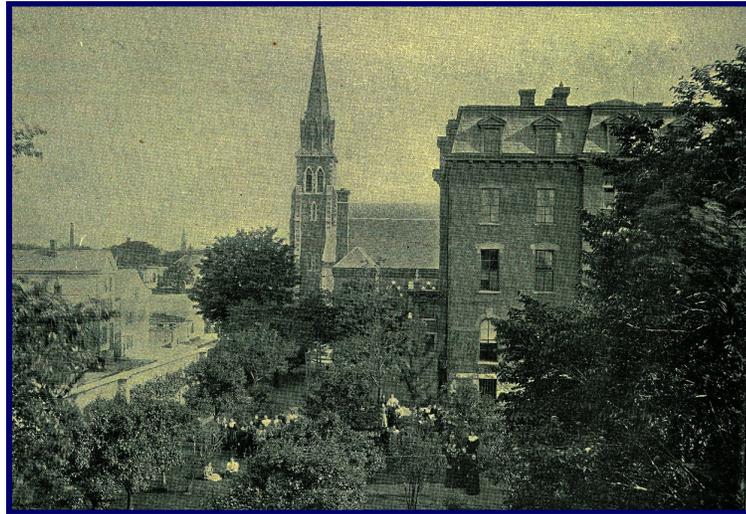


The exhibit of "the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair," which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

Typhoid Fever in Lowell



Notre Dame Academy
Lowell, Massachusetts
c. 1900

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—“Thanksgiving Day, Julia Corbett, one of our little boarders, became ill of typhoid fever. In vain did we hope for her recovery, for it was necessary to have the Last Sacraments administered on Christmas Eve. The little sufferer passed away the next evening. . .”

This entry by the chronicler of the Lowell Convent Annals for 1889 was a tragic but all too common occurrence during those years. Julia was about 8 years old when she died. She had made her First Communion the previous May and her parents had her buried in her Communion dress. While the Annalist mentions everyone’s sorrow, the death of a child was far too frequent to be unusual. In the words of the Annalist, little Julia Corbett’s parents exhibited the proper *resignation* upon their child’s death. In a world where death struck without discrimination, such “resignation” to death was lauded, not only in the Sisters’ Annals, but in the daily newspapers of that time as well.

Unbeknownst to the Sisters and the Corbett family, Julia’s death was only the beginning of what would become the city of Lowell’s Typhoid Epidemic. During the month that Julia grew ill, many others in Lowell also contracted typhoid. The epidemic lasted from November 1889 to April of 1891. During the 18 month epidemic, 3 Sisters grew ill, one died and another small boarder, Jennie McCahey, also died. Though the Annalist doesn’t indicate their illnesses, the descriptions of their symptoms point to typhoid fever.

How many other of the Notre Dame Academy’s children died during the epidemic is unknown. As is to be expected, with hundreds of children in their school, the Annalist only commented on the boarders who were well known to them. Typhoid fever began with chills, a high fever and abdominal pain. Those suffering from the illness were deathly sick for about a month and often experienced intestinal hemorrhaging. Typically, 25% of the infected died within a month of contracting the illness. After Julia’s death on December 26, 1889, the Sisters were so worried about their other boarders that they sent them to their convent in Somerville for several days. Little did they know that typhoid fever was not contagious, at least not in the usual way.

Others in the city and area were also fearful. Upon learning of the dramatic increase in typhoid fever in Lowell, the Massachusetts State Board of Health hired MIT biologist, William Sedgwick, to investigate. At first they suspected the culprit was infected milk, but Sedgwick’s investigation eliminated that as the cause. His first action was to order the city’s drinking water tested. Complicating the matter was that Lowell residents received water from five different sources: the Merrimack

River, Lynde Hill reservoir, the city's canals, local wells and area springs. Officials declared the drinking water to be "reasonably pure." Sedgwick wasn't convinced. After carefully testing all the water sources, he proclaimed the Merrimack River and canals to be the source of the typhoid bacteria.

For decades sewage and discharge from the textile mills had been dumped into the canals and river. Though some worried about the pollution, most people believed that running water would eliminate any contaminants. Sedgwick's report revealed that running water did not destroy the bacteria causing typhoid. This was the first time a scientific study of a public water system had been conducted and Lowell didn't take it lightly. The city ordered seven wells dug to provide their residents with clean water. And in confirmation of Sedgwick's findings, the typhoid epidemic in Lowell finally ended.



Textile Mills along the Merrimack River
Lowell, Massachusetts
From Google Images

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