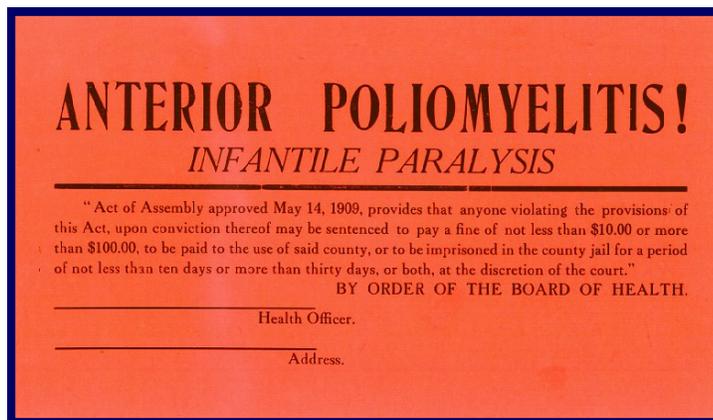




Annals from the Archives

The 1935 Polio Epidemic



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Card placed in windows of homes where patients were
quarantined, c. 1915
Image from Wikimedia Commons

—There have been many epidemics of infantile paralysis, otherwise known as polio throughout history. While the disease has been around for thousands of years, it wasn't understood and therefore was identified by a variety of names. Some believe that the Roman Emperor Claudius, known for his limp, had suffered from polio as a child. The first recognized epidemic of infantile paralysis in the United States occurred in Rutledge, VT in 1894 where 132 people were diagnosed with the virus and 18 died. The next major epidemic occurred in 1916. 27,000 people were diagnosed with the disease in the U.S. and more than 6000 died.

Understandably people were terrified of a disease that usually spiked during the summer months. These yearly outbreaks continued every summer in various parts of the U.S. into the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1940s and early 1950s, polio epidemics rose to frightening statistics. Just a few years before the Salk vaccine was introduced to the public in 1955, tens of thousands of children contracted the disease every year and thousands died. Others were left with debilitating symptoms, such as paralysis, muscle weakness or limps. Authorities urged public swimming pools to be closed and people going to movie theaters not to sit close to others. Insurance companies began selling polio policies to parents of newborns.

And so, it was understandable that people panicked during those summer months when children were most vulnerable. The first warning of danger to the city of Boston during the summer of 1935 appeared in the Boston Globe on August 1st. An article warned that, "since July 15th there have been 21 cases of infantile paralysis reported, all in Roxbury and Dorchester." The sisters at St. Gregory's in Dorchester reported in their Annals that "one of our second grade boys was stricken very severely with the dread disease. Sister Superior immediately sent a relic of Blessed Mother Julia to the little sufferer and within a month he was able to pay the Sisters a visit at the Convent."

The epidemic continued to spread up and down the coast of Massachusetts during that summer. Fall River was hard hit, as was the city of Boston, which had 147 new cases that month alone. By August 23rd, the superintendent of the schools, Patrick Campbell, reported that he was consulting with the State Health Commissioner as to whether delaying the opening of school should be considered. The discussion continued during the following weeks. However, the crisis escalated with more cases of children being stricken by the disease and several of them dying. Campbell decided to exercise caution and on September 4th announced that he would delay the opening of school until October 1st. Fr. R. J. Quinlin, supervisor of the Massachusetts parochial schools, agreed that Catholic schools in the affected areas would follow suit.

These decisions were not without controversy. The next day, Chelsea and Revere officials decided to open schools as usual on September 12th stating that, "children would be less likely to suffer if they were in school and under the supervision of nurses assigned to the school." But Cambridge and Lynn, also facing a number of new polio diagnoses, followed Boston's lead and delayed the opening of school until October.

In addition to the report of the second grade boy from St. Gregory's being affected by the disease, the sisters at the Notre Dame Academy on Granby Street in Boston told of one of their students contracting polio. "*Owing to the prevalence of Infantile Paralysis,*" the sisters at the Granby Street convent wrote, "*the opening of school was put off until September 30. One of its victims was a young girl who should have entered our Second Year Class.*"

While cooler weather led to a decline in the disease, every summer renewed parents' fears. But those years had one of the most famous polio victims in the White House. Before his presidency, FDR founded the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation in 1926 to begin research for the disease. He renamed the organization in 1938 the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. It was later christened the March of Dimes.

Methods used during those years included the iron lung to help victims breathe. Other techniques to treat those who had contracted the disease included a method advocated by Elizabeth Kenny, an Australian nurse. She urged patients to discard splints and move and stretch their muscles to aid in healing. While she was ridiculed at first, her method was finally proven to be of help to patients in recovery.

Epidemics continued every summer with the worst one occurring in 1955, the year the Salk vaccine was used in a nationwide immunization campaign. The disease was finally eradicated in the United States in 1979. While the number of cases worldwide are decreasing, war and famine often prevent children from having access to the vaccine. Despite that, the CDC reported that between 1988 and 2013 the number of cases worldwide had fallen by 99% and that 80% of populations live in areas that are now entirely free from polio.



Jonas Salk, 1914-1995

Developed the first successful polio vaccine

Image from Wikimedia

Sources consulted for this article

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- ◆ E Street, South Boston Convent Annals, 1927-1953.
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- ◆ Lynn Convent Journal, 1935-1953.
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