

*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

## Smallpox Epidemic from 1870-1873



Pest House in  
Quincy, MA  
Image from  
DigitalCommonwealth.org

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—Smallpox has been an every present danger throughout history. Records indicate it was prevalent as far back as 12,000 years ago. It has been responsible for many plagues and the deaths of hundreds of millions of people worldwide. The disease began like the flu, with aches and pains and fever and then exhaustion. After a few days of illness, red spots would emerge, spreading across the body which then developed into pus filled blisters that left scars on anyone who survived the disease. The mortality rate for those of European descent was more than 30%. Children's death rates were even higher. Native Americans and other indigenous groups were decimated by the disease not long after the Europeans arrived. Naturally people were terrified of smallpox. Those who survived were left with disfiguring scars and could suffer blindness as well.

Various attempts were made in the 18th and 19th centuries to inoculate people from smallpox. In 1721, Cotton Mather, a well known Boston Puritan minister urged people to be inoculated by introducing the pus from one of the blisters of an infected person into an incision in the arm of a person who had never had smallpox. This was not without controversy or without danger. Many Puritans viewed such efforts to prevent any kind of disease as playing God by daring to interfere in what some believed to be judgement coming from the hand of God. In addition, while the risks for such inoculation were not as great as contracting the disease in the usual manner, not everyone survived the procedure. Those who volunteered for inoculation had to be isolated for about 3 weeks in what became known as Pest Houses until they were no longer contagious. Edward Jenner began to use the less deadly cowpox virus for those inoculations in 1796. And in 1855, Massachusetts became the first state to require children be vaccinated against smallpox before entering schools. Despite these efforts, there continued to be outbreaks of smallpox across the state. One of the worst in Massachusetts occurred between 1870 to 1873, resulting in more than 1000 deaths.

The sisters in both the Lowell and Boston convents described the epidemic that was affecting their communities. In the fall of 1871, the sisters at the Notre Dame Academy in Lowell wrote that, "*Scarcely had we begun [the new school year] when smallpox broke out so violently that that we had to close our classes to our day pupils for almost two months; however, we had a good number of boarders, more than in other years. . . We were surrounded by cases everywhere and no one caught it. We attribute the protection to the Sacred Heart. . .*"

In Boston, the sisters at the NDA on Berkeley Street recorded that two of their pupils had decided to enter the Sisters of Notre Dame. "*In the month of March [1872] one of our pupils Mary Ann McKenna left for Cincinnati to enter the Novitiate with Jane O'Mara.*" But on "*the eve of their departure Mary Ann went to see a cousin of hers who was sick, but no one knew then that he had the smallpox, which appeared soon after and occasioned his death 3 days later. They arrived in Cincinnati on Friday and on Sunday, she was so sick that they took her to the infirmary at once, the small pox were soon visible. The physician declared them of the worst kind and had no hopes for her recovery. She received the Last Sacraments with great resignation happy to go to the good God.*" She did not die, though. During her illness, she was cared for by Sr. Florentina, who must have already had smallpox. After weeks, when it became clear she would survive, the doctor stated that, "*I never have*

met a similar case of which any one recovered." It took months of convalescence before she was finally strong enough to enter into the Sisters of Notre Dame. She took the name Sr. Mary of St. Roch, St. Roch having survived the plague and was often called upon to intercede for those stricken by pestilence or the plague. Sr. Mary of St. Roch eventually returned to Massachusetts to teach at Lowell's Notre Dame Academy.

Sr. Mary of St. Roch was one of the fortunate ones. Many of those who contracted the disease in Boston were sent against their will to the Smallpox Hospital on Gallop's Island, located in Boston Harbor, where they were isolated until they recovered or died. When that hospital grew too crowded, Boston opened another Smallpox Hospital on Albany Street, which was soon overwhelmed with the task of isolating the patients. Those who were sent there reported on deplorable conditions, that included filthy water, rotten food and broken water closets [now known as toilets].

After intensive vaccination programs during the 1960s and 1970s, the last case of smallpox was reported in 1977. In 2011 the World Health Organization stated that the disease, which had been one of the worst scourges of history, had been complete eradicated.

## *INOCULATION*

Those who are desirous to take the infection of the SMALL - POX, by inoculation, may find themselves accommodated for the purpose, by applying to.

Stephen Samuel Hawley

Fiskdale, in Sturbridge.

February 7, 1801

N. B. A Pest-House will be opened, and accommodations provided by the first day of March next.

Image from  
Forgotten New England

### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Lowell Convent Annals, 1852-1904.
- ◆ South Boston Broadway Street Annals, 1871-1888.
- ◆ [ForgottenNewEngland.com](http://ForgottenNewEngland.com)
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-1980.
- ◆ *The Story of Smallpox in Massachusetts* by Samuel Bayard Woodward, [New England Journal of Medicine](#), June 9, 1932.