

*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 also the "Annals of the Sisters of Notre Dame," Vol. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Smallpox Vaccinations in the 1880s



**February 2020**

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Dr. Michael F. Gavin (1844-1915)  
Physician for the South Boston  
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur  
during the 1880s  
Image from the *Boston Globe*  
May 21, 1915

—For those living during the 19th century, disease was an ever present reality. Tuberculosis, diphtheria, influenza, measles, mumps and rubella were just some of the many illnesses that had no cure or vaccine. Like everyone else, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur faced an unending threat of disease, both in their congregation and in their students. Despite the constant fear that most maladies could result in death, one terrible disease did have a vaccine during the 19th century—smallpox.

The smallpox vaccine had been developed in the late 1700s. At first, physicians collected cells from the sores of those already sick with the disease to infect healthy volunteers. Those patients usually developed a milder version of smallpox, however, during those years there was always a risk of death from such methods. A few decades later, though, doctors created a vaccine from cowpox, which was a milder version of the same illness.

With the success that these inoculations had against smallpox, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed a law in 1855 that required all schoolchildren to be vaccinated against smallpox. Despite that, not all complied with the law. Because not everyone agreed to be inoculated, there were several epidemics of smallpox during the 1870s and 1880s. The latest outbreak happened in Boston between 1901 and 1902.

In January of 1882, the Sisters in South Boston reported that “on the 30th of January Dr. Gavin had an order from the city authorities to vaccinate all our pupils and the Sisters also were vaccinated; he came for many days, first for the Sisters, afterwards for all the children.” The Dr. Gavin mentioned in the Annals was a Dr. Michael F. Gavin, a South Boston physician whose practice was located at 11 West Broadway Street, not far from the convent. The order from the Boston authorities was sent to all schools and public institutions, with the hope of stemming another smallpox outbreak.

There was good reason to fear. Though there were occasional reports of the illness in Boston, just ten years before the area had been overwhelmed with a smallpox epidemic beginning in 1870 and which lingered off and on for the next three years. More than 1000 people in Massachusetts died during that epidemic. During those years, many who contracted the disease in Boston were sent against their will to the Smallpox Hospital on Gallop’s Island, located in Boston Harbor. There they were kept in isolation 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 deplorable conditions, that included filthy water, rotten food and broken water closets [now known as toilets].

Dr. Gavin was born in Ireland in 1844. He arrived in Boston when he was 13. No doubt, he studied hard in school because he was accepted into Harvard’s Medical School, graduating in 1864 at the age of 20. He began his practice by working at the Boston City Hospital before joining the 57th Massachusetts Regiment as an assistant surgeon early in 1865. After the Civil War ended, he married Ellen Doherty of New York. They lived at 99 West Broadway in South Boston, less than a tenth of a mile from the Notre Dame convent at 50 West Broadway. Though it’s unclear whether he had met the sisters before the 1882 inoculations, his activity in the church, local organizations and other philanthropic endeavors makes it very likely he had at least heard of the sisters. It is more likely that he had met them at Sts. Peter and Paul Church.

Despite the city of Boston's efforts to vaccinate as many as possible, there were several reported outbreaks of smallpox in the area through 1882 and 1883. These continued into the early 20th century. The *Boston Globe* published multiple articles promoting the necessity of vaccination, which was provided free of charge to everyone in the city of Boston, as well as in many neighboring towns.

Smallpox continued to be widespread in the world into the 1960s and wasn't proclaimed completely eradicated until 1980.

**Ordinary prudence suggests vaccination as  
a precaution against the ubiquitous small-pox.**

From the *Boston Globe*  
January 3, 1882

**SMALL-POX PREVENTABLE.**

On several occasions we have called the attention of our readers to the value of vaccination as a preventive of small-pox, and now that this virulent disease has appeared in various parts of the country we do not think it inappropriate to again recur to it. Boston has not lately suffered from this scourge, but who can foretell how soon it may make its appearance among us? We know that in medical circles there are those to be found who ridicule the efficacy of Jenner's treatment, but we are content to let the facts speak for themselves. What we have hitherto contended, namely, that small-pox was in a great measure a preventable disease, is now unqualifiedly emphasized by a New York physician (Dr. Lewis A. Sayre),

From the *Boston Globe*  
January 10, 1882

**Better Vaccinate.**

The Boston Board of Health yesterday issued an order calling the attention of the people to the necessity of vaccination and revaccination. It is estimated that at least 100,000 persons in Boston today require vaccination. In other words, one-fourth of the population of Boston is liable to an attack of small-pox if exposed. Free vaccination with pure animal virus will be continued as heretofore at the city physician's office in the Charity building, Chardon street, daily, from 10.30 a. m. to 12.30 p. m.

From the *Boston Globe*  
January 13, 1882

**Sources consulted for this article**

- ◆ Broadway Street Convent Annals, 1871-1888.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2020.