

Cholera in Washington County, 1850-1853

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Cholera returned to Washington County again in the 1850s. The epidemic of Asiatic cholera in the 1830s spread panic in the local community, so its reappearance twenty years later was a cause for concern in the local jurisdictions.

Cholera is an infection of the small intestine by the bacterium *vibrio cholerae*. It is transmitted primarily by drinking water or eating food that has been contaminated by the feces of an infected person. The symptoms are profuse diarrhea and vomiting. This can cause dehydration so rapid that the blood gets thick and the skin becomes a deathlike blue. Cholera victims can die within hours. Onset of the disease usually occurs one to five days after exposure. The term *cholera morbus* was used in the 19th century to describe non-epidemic cholera and other gastrointestinal diseases that resemble cholera. Today we use the term gastroenteritis for these conditions.

For much of the 19th century, doctors believed that cholera was a locally produced miasmatic disease—an illness brought on by direct exposure to the products of filth and decay. The theory goes that bad air is responsible for the spread of diseases such as cholera. It was not until 1855 that Dr. John Snow, one of the fathers of epidemiology, observed a concentration of cholera victims in an area of London that was served by one well. He was the first to postulate that cholera was caused by contaminated water. That outbreak was halted when that well was closed.

This belief in bad air as the cause of this disease is evident in an August 14, 1850 notice in the Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom* newspaper. The Mayor and Council asked the citizens of Hagerstown to take all reasonable and practical means to guard against disease. They ordered and required all owners and occupants of Hagerstown to draw off all stagnated water, open ditches and water courses through properties and to remove all animal and vegetable matter from premises. If this was not done, the Mayor and Council would remove such items at the expense of the owners or occupants. There would be a fine of \$5 for placing a dead carcass or “anything calculated to produce disease or a nuisance in any of the city streets or alleys.” There would be a fine of \$20 for throwing or emptying any filth in the town run.



AT THE GATES.
Our safety depends upon official vigilance.

Harper's Weekly, 1885. U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Visual Culture and Public Health Posters exhibition. Image is in the public domain.

In August 1852, the paper reported cholera in Chambersburg with a number of deaths noted, including the wife of a prominent Chambersburg attorney. The article warned against imprudence in diet and uncleanness. “Need we add a word to caution the citizens of our town against imprudence in diet, uncleanness, &c., when the fell destroyer is so near, that with the next breeze we may feel its pestilential breath.”

On June 1, 1853, the Hagerstown paper urged the city to adopt sanitary measures. They reported, “our streets alleys and premises are not as free from dirt and impure matter as they should be. The exhalations from filth are universally admitted to constitute a strong exciting cause of cholera and other fatal diseases.”

Also in June 1853, on the 8th, the paper reported sudden deaths in Williamsport. Was this true cholera or *cholera morbus*? It stressed the need for the adoption of sanitary measures. “Then if this much dreaded epidemic should visit our town, during the summer, we shall have no cause to reproach ourselves for having invited it here by our own imprudence.”

On July 6, 1853, the Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* ran an article under the headline, “Health in Williamsport.” The article quoted a letter from Williamsport to *The Baltimore Sun*. In it, the correspondent reported a fearful epidemic that resembles cholera. Since many of the victims lingered for a week or more, it is assumed that this was not true cholera. There were 33 deaths in the previous five weeks including those caused by diarrhea, *cholera morbus*, cholera and other diseases. The doctors were using fever and ague cures to treat the cases in the early stages.

Cure and Prevention of Cholera.

GREAT WESTERN REMEDY for Cholera and Diarrhœa and other diseases of Bowels.— It will check Diarrhœa in ten minutes and abate the other premonitory symptoms of Cholera immediately. For sale by V. THOMSON. June 28, 1854.

Herald of Freedom and Torch Light, 1854

On August 10, 1853, the Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* reported that the Williamsport *Journal of the Times* was accusing them of reporting cholera deaths in Williamsport and suppressing notice of those in Hagerstown. The *Herald* responded that they had not suppressed the news intentionally but admitted that some deaths may have occurred, but notice of them may not have been turned in by the deceased’s friends or family. The article went

on to say that there had been two deaths in the last month under the symptoms of cholera; one three weeks before and the other about ten days prior. Both were “superinduced by great imprudence in diet but invited by debilitating constitutions.”

The same newspaper noted that false reports of cholera were made by unscrupulous people in order to “fleece” the country people by making them too afraid to sell in the towns. They could then go to the country to buy and sell with the country people at their own prices.

On September 21, 1853, a letter to the *Evangelical Lutheran* newspaper, printed in Springfield, Ohio, claimed that the physicians and clergy had left Williamsport during the epidemic. Reverend W. Bishop “indignantly refuted this calumny.” “Our physicians never forsook their post of danger and trust... And furthermore, for the services they have rendered this community and the cause of humanity they deserve not only the thanks of our own community but the unbounded gratitude of all good men...”

The articles on this occurrence of cholera give the impression that this event was not nearly as grave as the epidemic of the 1830s in this area. It also creates questions about the general condition of Hagerstown. If the Mayor and Council needed to enact fines to get residents to clean up their property, to not throw carcasses into the street, and to keep the waterways clear, that leaves the impression of a cluttered and rather dirty place. Almost every article and notice mentions the need for a general cleanup and proper sanitation. Although we know that cholera is not spread through the air, keeping rotting material and other debris out of the water ways and ditches could not help but improve the general welfare.