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THE HISTORY OF SMALLPOX IN RHODE ISLAND.*

By DONALD CHURCHILL, M.D.,

Providence, R. I.

When Dr. Welch asked me to say a few words tonight on "The History of Smallpox in Rhode Island" I told him that there was very little I could add to what I had already recently presented to you in another paper and should much prefer to have someone else take up the work. He insisted, however, and that is my excuse for once more presenting to you these few facts, authentic as near as it has been possible for me to find them. Again at the outset let me say that all I have to present is taken largely, and in many cases bodily, from Dr. Chapin's elaborate chapter on "Epidemics and Medical Institutions" written for the "History of Rhode Island," from pamphlets kindly loaned me by Mr. Bridgham, librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, from data given to me by Drs. Chapin and King of the City Health Department and from the *Providence Daily Journal*, May 7, 1899 and March 7, 1902.

A generation ago what Mark Twain pleases to call "The Waffle Iron Face" was familiar enough. Thanks to an intelligent treatment of the disease and particularly, of course, to vaccination the pock marked individual is a rarity.

Early English writers say that the Spanish explorers first brought smallpox to America and they perhaps, can bear the blame as well as anyone. The Indians and smallpox were the pioneers two greatest foes, but they had the satisfaction of knowing that the latter made greater inroads upon the tribes than upon the whites, although the colony was seldom if ever free from it.

The first severe visitation of smallpox to Rhode Island, took place in 1690 and the disease raged with great violence. Public affairs were neglected,

*Read before the Providence Medical Association, May 5, 1902.

the Assembly, then sitting in Newport, did little business and private trade operations were neglected throughout the winter of 1690-1691. Newport was the greatest sufferer. In 1712 the first efforts were made to combat the disease by legislation, a quarantine act then being passed; it was, however, not very effective, for in 1716 the disease again made its appearance in several parts of the colony. Newport held a special election at which a hospital was ordered built on Coasters Harbor Island. Bristol then largely escaped the epidemic, but in 1732 the town authorities were constrained to procure a house for smallpox patients. Providence had its first smallpox hospital in 1751, when the General Assembly made an appropriation for its establishment. In 1752 Thomas Kinnicut presented a bill (town paper 195), for damage to his house through its use for a pest house. There must have been a large number of cases in that year, as the Town Council at a meeting on April 11th, gave a large number of orders for various kinds of supplies and for making coffins, cleansing clothing, attendance on sick, etc. (town paper 219).

Inoculation was introduced into the colony in 1772 by Dr. Jonathan Easton and in that year the General Assembly attempted to legalize the practice which had developed intense opposition. The proposed legislation was defeated, but the operation was continued by intelligent physicians. In 1776 the matter was again brought before the Assembly which voted to establish a hospital in each county where persons could go to be inoculated. On July 2, 1776, Ambrose Page, Benjamin Man, Jabez Bowen, Nathaniel Wheaton and Barnard Eddy in Providence were appointed a committee "to find out the most suitable place for erecting a hospital to inoculate in for the smallpox and to draw up rules and regulations" for it; they reported in favor of "the place called High Bank lying to the north-east of Great Point" as "the most proper place that we can find" (town paper No. 995.)

"Then some enterprising individual conceived the idea of establishing attractive resorts where young people of both sexes could go, be cared for and have a good time during the progress of the induced disease. In 1792 someone established such a private hospital which developed into a popular watering place on Ram Island, in the Sound, near New London. The proprietor advertised to provide all necessaries and some luxuries, including a darky fiddler, for dancing, for the small sum of \$6 a head. The place became immensely popular, and many young Rhode Island youths and maidens went there and were inoculated with smallpox and made the acquaintance of Cupid as well. Many happy married couples dated their first acquaintanceship to their sore-arm isolation on Ram Island. Vaccination has doubtless saved many lives, but it is prosaic beside the romance of good old inoculation days."

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bay, some of which advertised hunting and fishing facilities and other attractions to mitigate the unpleasantness of a patient's stay. The disease continued to afflict this locality during a number of years and demanded a good deal of attention from the authorities.

Providence town paper 2775 dated Aug. 27, 1782, is an address to the "Moderator and Freemen" of Providence upon the necessity of having a building for a smallpox hospital "and being desirous of obtaining permission to carry on the inoculation in your vicinity" proposed to buy about six acres of land "on the west side of the river partly within the limits of Providence and partly within those of Cranston" whereon to erect suitable buildings and have "one room properly furnished containing forty square feet to your town," etc. For this concession he wanted "the full and exclusive Right of carrying on Inoculation of the Smallpox." This matter was considered in town meeting but no action was taken. In 1792 Newport set apart the old quarantine building for a smallpox hospital. To this large numbers resorted and thereafter the private institutions rapidly declined.

Vaccination was introduced into the colony and in fact to the new world by Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse in the spring of 1801. It was met by almost as much opposition as was its predecessor inoculation. It was in its earliest days fought bitterly. The "cow pox" method was assailed on every side and tremendously ridiculed. One of the forcible weapons of its opponents being that the use of the virus caused the patients to develop bovine characteristics, extreme cases even to the growing of hoofs and horns. All this, however, did not prevent the people of Providence from employing Sylvanus Fansher to vaccinate the public at the town's expense. He vaccinated 4,305 persons and rendered a bill of \$233.25 or about five cents for each operation which was certainly cheap enough.

To each one of his patients he gave a handbill bearing printed directions in verse for further treatment. A portion of this bill is as follows:—

"Loose sleeves are best and arms kept cool.
 Children need not be kept from school.
 And when the inoculated part
 Feels uneasy, itch or smart,
 Don't shove up sleeves, nor scratch, nor fret it,
 But with some salt and water wet it.
 It is presumed no prudent mother
 Will vaccinate one child from another
 'Tis better to make the business sure
 And ever after feel secure."

Humanized virus was largely employed by Dr. Leonard the chief of the Vaccination Staff for Providence even as late as 1900. In this connection the

following, taken from the Third Annual Report of the Superintendent of Health of the City of Providence for the year ending Dec. 31, 1885, is of considerable interest. "Humanized virus has been used by this department ever since regular public vaccination was begun. In view of a public statement recently made by Dr. Martin of Boston (see *Boston Med. and Surg. Journal*, Dec. 10, 1885, page 560) that "it is no longer possible to observe the effects of long humanized virus, for there is probably none of it in the country, that passing under that name being but a few removes from the cow," the following statement is made by Dr. Charles H. Leonard, Chief of the Vaccinating Staff:

"The record of the vaccine now used in the public vaccinations in this city may be traced from arm to arm by name and date continuously back to Feb. 29, 1868. That was fully two years before the importation of the famous Beaugency stock of animal virus, from which the country has been so largely supplied. Furthermore I am assured by Dr. J. W. C. Ely that the virus then used by himself and Dr. Collins in their public vaccinations was propagated in a continuous line from that in use in the city at the opening of the present record, July 1856, at the office of the Superintendent of Health, but as it was largely obtained from private patients the pedigree can not be accurately traced. Moreover all the traditions concerning the matter are to the effect that the virus then in use was of the stock sent to this country to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse by Dr. Jenner in the spring of 1801 with the statement that it was from his original stock. It is accordingly a safe assertion to make that this virus which we are now using is in all probability of the old Jennerian stock derived from the heifer in 1796." The report goes on to say:

"It may be considered extremely fortunate that these facts can be so fully substantiated by the records, and that there is no room for error or mistake in regard to their proving the main point in question; that the virus now used by this department has been transmitted continuously from child to child for thirty years."

In the report of the Superintendent of Health for 1900 we read:

"During the year 1900 the number of persons vaccinated was 2,168. Humanized virus was largely employed. For methods see Report of Superintendent of Health 1886, page 31. The number of transfers of humanized virus in 1900 was 29, making the total number of transfers since 1868, when an accurate record was begun, 667."

Sterilized glycerinated lymph has, of course, now entirely done away with the humanized virus, but the supply of the latter is still perpetuated by Dr. Leonard.

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tion and this opposition to a certain extent exists today. While it was slowly overcoming popular prejudice the ravages of smallpox continued although not so fiercely as in the years before.

In 1815 and again in 1822 alarm over the expected disease led to other public vaccinations which doubtless greatly reduced the mortality. In the seventeen years previous to 1855 there were but seventy-five deaths from smallpox in the State, but in the winter following there were 130 cases in Providence alone and much alarm was felt.

The next visitation took place in 1858-9 as a result of a visit of a merchant to New York City where in some unknown manner he was exposed. He was taken with varioloid on Christmas day 1858 and soon recovered. As a direct result of this case there were ninety-three cases of smallpox with five deaths. Radical measures were adopted at that time to prevent the spread of the disease, with good effect and the inestimable benefits of thorough vaccination were well shown.

Providence was practically free from the disease till 1864 when there were 145 cases. From that year there were very few cases until 1872-3, when there were twenty-seven cases in Providence, while in 1881-2 there were twenty cases in Newport with six deaths. In 1883 there was one death in Providence. From '84-'91 inclusive there were no cases in Providence. In '92 there were four cases and three deaths. In '93 no cases. In '94, five cases and two deaths. From '95 to '98 inclusive there were no cases. In '99, five cases and no deaths. In 1900 no cases. In 1901 eleven cases and two deaths. Of the present epidemic in the state I shall not speak, as exact figures cannot be given, and the disease is as yet not entirely under control.

In closing I will present to you several of the old town records which will, I am sure, show you that our ancestors fully understood the care necessary to prevent the spread of the disease.

Town Council Book, p. 206-Nov. 18, 1760.

Recites that "Jeremiah Ladd a soldier in the Colony servis has lately returned from Camp and is now sick with the small-Pox orders (all other persons) Remove immediately but to leve all their things in said House, and Archibald Weire and Mary Patten are hereby ordered to Repair forthwith to Said Ladd and to take proper care of him During his sickness."—and report to Council "of all persons that shall come near said House unless they produce a certificate from the Council excep Jabez Bowen Junr and Henry Sterling (two Doctors) and Daniel Trip and William Brown are hereby ordered to fence up the Road in two places one at the Bridge (The "Bridge" was "Tripps Bridge" so called at the place known formerly as "Trip town" now as "Manton" see Town Council Book 4 p. 237, last entry.) and the other to Extend from Neriah Watermans Corner to Kings Corner and the

two Doctors that attend said Ladd During his sickness shall shift themselves and wash with vinegar Each time before they Return from said House. And the Clerk of the Council is hereby empowered to Grant certificates to proper Persons to watch with said Ladd, they complying with the rules prescribed by said Council, for the Doctors—"

Jeremiah Ladd died before Nov. 26, and on Dec. 1, page 206 Council "voted and Resolved that Doctor Henry Sterling and Jabez Bowen, Junr be hereby forbid to Lodg or to have any intercourse with any person or persons that have not had the Small pox without Special License first Obtained—and the Clerk of the Council is hereby ordered to send a copy of this order to Each of them."

Dec. 17, 1760— Town Council Book 4, p 208—

"Whereas Sarah Brown is now Ill with the Small Pox at the House of Isaiah Hawkins, it is Voted and Resolved that the Clerk of the Council Grant forth a summons to George Taylor Esq, Joseph Turpin, Samuel Butler and John Russell Requiring them forthwith to Remove the said Sarah Brown to the Pest House— and the Clerk of the Council is hereby directed to provide a Box for to remove the said Sarah in."

Upon the protest of Messrs Taylor Turpin Butler and certificate of Dr. Henry Sterling it was on Dec. 18th Town Council Book 4— p. 208— "Resolved that the said Sarah be not Removed, and that the Clerk of the Council Grant forth a Warrant to order Isaiah Hawkins and family to Remove and to fence up the Highway in Two places, Grant a Summons Requiring Richard Young to Goe forthwith and nurse the said Sarah Brown."

17th September A. D. 1759. Town Council Book 4, page 193.

"Whereas Capt. Benjamin Smith has Departed this Life with the Small pox, and his relations have this day aplyed to the Council for Liberty to Inter him in the Common burying place, which is granted by said Council provided they follow this our order : to wit.

they are to rap his body in a Tarred Sheet, and put him in a Coffin Tared within and without and over that Rap a Tarpoilin and then Remove the Corps out of the house, and put it into anoth Coffin which is to be pitched or tarred within, and then to proceed with the Corpes by water to a place called Cold Spring, and from Thence to pass between the Lands of Mr. Winsor and Merrit to the Land of John Whipple to the bureing place. Keeping in Equal Distance between the houses of Luther and Dexter the following persons being perposed to attend the funeral and to bury him aforesaid to wit. George Law Christopher Sheldon— George Corlis, John Birkit Rufus Hopkins Benj'n Doubledu Nicholas Bragg Samuel Warner Peter Ritto Joseph Turpin James Franks Obadiar Brown and John Brown — they shifting their cloathing properly."

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