

Mount Healthy Historical Society



April 2020

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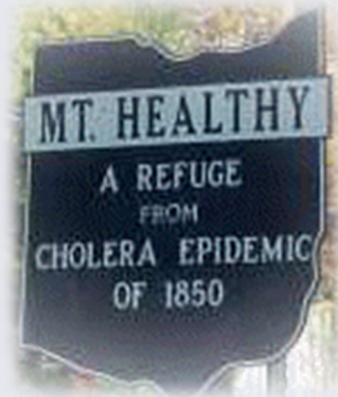
Julie Turner

Special announcement

Due to the current pandemic and stay-at-home orders, all Historical Society events and activities are cancelled until further notice. Hopefully this will all be behind us soon, and we can get back to normal.

For now, everyone stay safe and stay well.

Most of you already know that the name Mt. Healthy came before the cholera epidemic of 1850, but that doesn't mean that the epidemic wasn't an important part of the town's past.



Want to know more?

Read on....

NOT open until further notice:

The Mt. Healthy Historical Society Museum is open most Tuesday and Saturday mornings, 9-11, and the first Sunday of each month (except January and February), 1-3 p.m.

Address:

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history.org](http://www.mthealthyhistory.org)

The cholera epidemic of 1850

Cholera appeared in the United States in 1832, likely brought by European immigrants. This was before the development of the germ theory of disease, so people had a poor understanding of what caused various illnesses and epidemics. Cholera, it turned out, was spread by ingesting water or food contaminated by feces, but nobody knew at that time the importance of hand-washing. Vomiting and diarrhea are the main symptoms, and can be so severe that a victim can die within hours of their onset. It's no wonder that this was such a terrifying disease, even to a population fairly accustomed to periodic epidemics of one sort or another.



Cincinnati and its surrounding communities were hit by that 1832 outbreak, but it would not be the last, or the worst, cholera epidemic in the region. Starting in 1849, a particularly devastating outbreak would ravage the nation. The *American Medical Gazette* of July, 1850, reported: “All who know any thing on the subject by experience, shrink from its approach with an instinctive dread, beyond that which is felt in relation to almost any other disease.” The report went on to say, “Numerous theories have recently been promulgated in relation to the nature of Cholera—its treatment, both of prevention and cure.... There is no medical subject upon which a greater diversity of opinion exists at this moment.”



The following month the same medical journal announced a “cure” being promoted by a New Jersey doctor: “Give the patient one teaspoonful of chloroform in a wine glass of hot toddy, every fifteen minutes until reaction is fully induced; and if the cramps are not stopped by this at once, let the patient inhale chloroform enough to make him entirely easy. At the same time roll him in blankets, wrung out of hot mustard water.” Most doctors, however, still saw bleeding and purging to be the best treatment for most diseases. Because of this, it's difficult to pin down fatality rates for such epidemics, as the “cure” itself could be deadly.

Most doctors in the early to mid-1800s attributed sickness to bad air (the word malaria literally means “bad air”). But some were ahead of their time. One British physician, John Snow, published *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera* in 1849, correctly linking the disease to contaminated food and water and carried by tiny, unseen organisms. He traced one outbreak to a particular contaminated water pump. Yet the medical community overall would be slow to accept germ theory over the following decades.

So why was Mt. Healthy spared? Most likely it was because the community sits up on a hill, and so avoided pollution from outhouses and farm run-off from higher locations. Other factors could also help people avoid the disease, even if they had no idea why. Any food or beverage preparation that involved boiling, for example, would have made eating and drinking safer, but that wouldn't have been confined to individual communities.

Finally, although cholera seems like a thing of the past, it still exists. After the Haitian earthquake of 2010, that nation suffered a severe outbreak due to contaminated water supplies. Let's take a moment to be grateful for modern water supplies and soap, and the end of bleeding and purging as “cures.”

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