

Disease in Jefferson County Missouri

Smallpox/Diphtheria/Scarlet Fever/Fevers/Influenza/Pneumonia

By: Lisa K. Gendron

Sickness and disease played a very important role in the lives of our ancestors. Although by the mid 1800s, advances had been made in understanding the cause and prevention of disease, many epidemic illnesses still caused great alarm to the public.

Diphtheria and Scarlet Fever were two very contagious and potentially life-threatening bacterial diseases restricted largely to children below the age of puberty. The symptoms were often confused, as their symptoms of fever and sore throat are similar. However, Diphtheria was considered to have the highest mortality rate. Many families lost several children at a time to this dread disease.

Various fevers, including Malaria, Dysentery, Typhoid, and Yellow Fever also plagued the early settlers. Many different names were applied to these fevers. Malaria was often called fever and ague or intermittent fever because of its alternating fever and chills. Dysentery with its fever, cramps, and diarrhea was sometimes referred to as Flux. The fever which accompanied Typhoid usually lasted two to three weeks, giving it various names such as slow fever, nervous fever, and long fever. The term bilious fever has also been applied to many of these fevers.

When Yellow Fever made its appearance in a community, terror followed closely along. The irreparable damage done to the liver and kidneys, which caused the yellow tint to the skin, was almost always fatal. The diseases incubation period was short, usually four to five days, rendering treatment basically useless.

Influenza and respiratory diseases such as pneumonia and pleurisy were probably among the most widespread of all illnesses. However they were not met with the fear and consternation in which the more spectacular diseases were met.

Because of its high mortality rate and the possibility of being disfigured for life, Smallpox - or Variola - was probably the most feared of all contagious diseases. It recognized no age barriers and was highly contagious. The best protection against smallpox was a previous attack or inoculation (also called variolation). After several cases of smallpox appeared in Jefferson County, Missouri, the following advertisement was placed in the January 13, 1882 edition of The Democrat newspaper.

VACCINATE! I am prepared to vaccinate with Higgins pure, non-humanized virus, all who may apply at my office at Zion on the afternoon of each Wednesday and Saturday. No risk when this matter is used. **J. E. Morris, M. D.**

The following articles are from The Democrat, Hillsboro, Jefferson County, Mo.

April 5, 1872

OBITUARY - DIED - At his residence in Hillsboro, Tuesday, April 2nd, 1872, of small pox, **John Williams**, Collector of Jefferson County, Mo. This is certainly the saddest incident we have ever been called upon to record, more especially on account of the melancholy circumstances. On account of the fearful character of the disease his friends in Hillsboro, were detained from visiting him, and

assisting in soothing him in his last painful hours on earth, and comforting his bereaved ones who have suffered a loss that the world cannot replace.

Those who would otherwise have been with him, occupy public positions where they would have been guilty at least of great neglect of their duties to the public had they not strictly guarded against assisting in any way to spread the disease. He did not suffer however for want of attention. Besides his wife who labored only as a wife can, and a hired nurse, **Dr. Pipkin** was with him all the time, and Dr. Brewster a good part of the time.

He caught the small pox from a man who after burying three of his family who died with the disease, came to Mr. Williams' office -- stood around there an hour or two and paid him some money. If there is not, there should be, a heavy penalty against any who will carelessly assist in the spread of this disease.

April 12, 1872

The small-pox has as yet spread but little in Hillsboro. Mr. Williams' two little girls have the varioloid, but are getting along very well. **J.C. Power**, has the small pox very badly, having caught the disease very foolishly. In fact he committed the rash and imprudent ? we ever heard a man in his right mind committing. His family is to be pitied, as they are in almost a helpless condition. He will probably not recover, as his health is other-wise very feeble.

Maxville Mo., April 24, 1872

Editor Jefferson Democrat,

At one time I had expected the smallpox to have passed away, but the last few days seems to have spread it again, and if we should get a week or two of warm weather, it will then spread all through the settlements. Those having the smallpox, as soon as they get out of bed, go among the people and set them all agoing. There have been so far, fifty-two cases of smallpox and eleven deaths from same, in the neighborhood of Maxville.

May, 1872

We have heard many complaints last week from citizens of Rock Township of the carelessness with which those infected with the smallpox act, by which the disease is communicated to their neighbors. We were informed that the Priest, **Father Brockhagan**, positively assured the people that there was no danger of contracting the disease in a holy place like the Church and while attending to their religious ordinances, and that the corpses were brought to the Church and the rites performed in the presence of the congregation and school children, and that people attended the Church with their faces covered with scabs. If any person thinks himself wronged by the above statement we are ready to give our informant. We are not prepared to take anything back, for we think it time that people guilty of such inexcusable negligence or foolishness should be handled without gloves. If a pastor is so ignorant as to mislead, or so depraved as to delude his congregation, or the people so infatuated as to believe such nonsense, they need exposing; while, if such is not the case, they can easily produce the evidence.

December, 1881

We learn that a colored man on **Mrs. O'Fallon's** farm, near Sulphur Springs, has smallpox.

The fatal case of smallpox we mentioned two weeks ago, occurred at **Joseph Landoit's**. The disease was communicated to the family by some one from St. Louis.

Judge Elkins arrived in Hillsboro last Friday, complaining of being unwell, and it was noticed that his face was broken out with some sort of eruptions. He was in his office next day and Sunday, but everybody thought smallpox, and fought shy of him, which made him very indignant. Sunday afternoon he rode down to Victoria, staid all night at **Meyer's** hotel and went on **Whitney's** train next morning to Pevely to resume school teaching. That evening **Dr. McNutt** sent back word that the Judge really had the varioloid. It is hardly necessary to add that the people of our town are excited, and using all precautions known to prevent the disease getting a hold.

Judge Williams was prevented attending Court, by sickness in his family; his oldest boy being down with typhoid, **Dr. Berkley** is in attendance.

George Cole, colored, was sent to jail, from Kimmswick, for committing an assault. Next morning he complained of being sick, and the sheriff learned that he had been with a smallpox case, so the jail door was opened and Cole was told to walk out and walk home. He walked.

There is a case of smallpox at the house of **Mr. Hesse**, not far from Pevely.

A Negro man named **Wilburn**, died of smallpox, on Glaize creek, one day last week or week before. His wife left him and the body lay there three days when some one set fire to the cabin and burned up cabin, body and all.

We are permitted to publish the following extract from a letter from **Dr. McNutt** of Pevely to County Clerk **Donnell**.

I write in justice to, and without the knowledge of **Judge Elkins**, to say that he went to Hillsboro on Friday, the 9th inst. only after he had my positive assurance that he did not have smallpox or varioloid; and I am satisfied that it was his implicit confidence in my diagnosis, knowing that I am familiar with the disease, that prompted him to persist in the mad folly of going around in the face of so much opposition. I regret that I could not see him Saturday morning or even Friday evening as doubtless the eruption was then sufficiently developed to be easily recognized. I hope you will show this to any interested parties, that they may deal leniently with the unfortunate blunder and throw the mantle of charity over any overt act the Judge may have committed.

Quite a fright was occasioned by the death of a colored citizen of Jefferson County, on the farm of **J. J. O'Fallon**. The colored man died with smallpox, and it was with difficulty any person could be found to bury him. Finally a colored man was found who had had the smallpox, who agreed to take the job for \$25. A pony purse was raised of \$10, and next morning there was a new made grave near where the cabin had stood, but the cabin had disappeared, and only fire coals and ashes remained. No new cases of smallpox have been reported in that vicinity, and it is to be hoped that the dreadful disease is buried in the ashes of the cabin. Our doctors are busily engaged in vaccinating the populace generally.

January 1882

Dr. Bainbridge will be in Hillsboro next Monday to do any dental work that may be desired. He will also have a supply of vaccine virus, and be prepared to vaccinate all who call. He will remain only three days, and those who want work done should not delay calling on him.

The only cases of smallpox that we know of, in the county, are in the colored family on Glaize creek, and the family of **Mr. Hess** on Sandy. One of Hess's boys died last week, and the others are reported as improving. All who are not vaccinated should be so at once, for the disease is liable to be brought from St. Louis any day.

Judge Elkins little girl died last Monday. Some of the Judge's actions since he contracted the dreadful disease, which prostrated his whole family and has taken away the idol of his home (have been unwise) but his punishment has been greater than any one could have wished, and we are sure that all thoughts of vengeance will vanish if he is careful to not spread the disease any further. He and his family took care of themselves, no one visiting them but the doctor. On Tuesday, in company with **Eugene Brewster**, he conveyed the remains of his little **Maude** to the DeSoto cemetery. It has certainly been a severe affliction.

Dr. Brewster requests us to state positively that all danger of infection of smallpox from **Judge Elkins** family is over; the remaining members being well and everything thoroughly disinfected.

Judge Elkins has decided to resume business in Probate Court on the 21st inst. We presume that there will be no danger of him communicating smallpox to any one.

A disease resembling scarlet fever of a mild type, has prevailed among the children of Dry Creek, but there have been no deaths from it, that we have heard of.

News from **Judge Yerger** is discouraging. He has a severe attack of typhoid fever. LATER - Just as we go to press we learn that the Judge died on Wednesday afternoon. He will be buried today at noon.

Mrs. James White has been quite sick with typhoid fever, but is improving rapidly under the treatment of **Dr. Auerswald**.

There was a case of varioloid discovered last Sunday; a little boy about two and a half years old, son of **Mr. Hout** living near the old Seminary in the south end of town. (DeSoto) Proper precautions have been taken to stop any spread of the disease, and as the house is isolated, it is thought will be none. The school board stopped for a week, **Miss Berkely's** school, which is held in the Seminary building, to await further developments. It is supposed by the parents, that their little one contracted the disease from a young man who had been stopping with them, who was visiting St. Louis nearly every day.

Last Saturday evening some one started the report that one of **Mr. Pacaut's** little daughters had the smallpox. The first **Mr. Pecaut** noticed was people leaving the sidewalk and walking in the street as they passed his store. He made enquiries what was the matter, and then marched his whole family into the front store, where everyone could see that there was no smallpox or anything else the matter with them. The scamp who started the rumor, ought to be hooted out of town, and will be pretty apt to get that, if nothing worse is discovered.

March 1882

The wife of **Fred Mason**, (col.) living in the Meramec bottom below the **Gray** farm, died of smallpox on the 19th inst., aged 48 years. This is the first case that has occurred in that part of the County, and every precaution has been taken to

prevent the spread of the disease. It is supposed the woman got it from some second hand clothing, as she had not been away from home.

One of **Polk Williams** little children died of scarlet fever last Saturday. They live about four miles from Hillsboro, and the disease was carried from family.

November, 1918

PROCLAMATION

On account of the prevalence of Influenza, it is hereby ordered that Schools, Churches, Billiard and Pool Halls, Theatres and Moving Picture Shows be closed until further notice; that saloons cigar stores, etc., close at 10 p.m., that all citizens refrain congregating in crowds of more than six on the street or in other places and that children remain on their own premises.

Done by order of the Board of Health of the City of Festus, Mo., this 12th day of November 1918.

J. Scott Wolff, Mayor

Dr. Rutledge Health Officer