

“When one shingle sends up smoke”:
The Summit Beacon Advises Akron
About the Epidemic Cholera, 1849

Elizabeth Hall

Asiatic cholera was a deadly pandemic phenomenon. Howard Markel’s account of the early cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth century stresses the deep anxiety that the disease inspired: “No disease, with the possible exception of yellow fever, aroused more fear in nineteenth-century America than cholera Before the development of intravenous fluids in the twentieth century, cholera victims could dehydrate and die within a matter of hours after an attack.” Markel reveals a crucial factor that contributed to the 1849 strain of Asiatic cholera, which claimed the lives of thousands of Americans: “the Atlantic Ocean ceased to play its traditional role of buffer to the spread of epidemic diseases, as steamships transported growing numbers of



Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature pairs forgotten readings with new essays that explain them. In this installment, we have an essay by Elizabeth Hall introducing a collection of newspaper articles on the 1849 cholera epidemic in Ohio. *Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature* is edited by Jon Miller at The University of Akron. For more information, visit ideaexchange.uakron.edu/nineteenth-centuryohioliterature.

emigrants from impoverished and unhealthy regions of the world to the United States.” The want of public health and sewage systems in various cities and towns throughout America became more apparent, especially with the humid weather in the summer of 1849.

Several cities in Ohio, including Cincinnati and Sandusky, were adversely affected by this disease. Ron Davidson describes Sandusky’s 1849 outbreak as the “most devastating” of the many that broke out in Ohio cities. This outbreak was also distinguished by the great number of residents who fled the city. Davidson estimates that “nearly two-thirds (or more) of the population left Sandusky.”

While the Sandusky Board of Health authorized strict ordinances to contain the cholera outbreaks of the 1830s, the 1849 pandemic was far more severe. Surviving newspaper records indicate that travelers from Cincinnati, who came to Sandusky via the Mad River and Lake Erie Railroad, may have skirted these ordinances.

Once the epidemic had spread beyond municipal control, coffins for victims were often “nailed hastily together” with “rough unfinished boards” (Rosenberg 116). Hundreds of others were buried in a long, trench-style grave on Harrison Street (“Cholera Cemetery”; Davidson “Cholera in Sandusky”). The cemetery was restored in 1924 after being neglected for several decades (Davidson “Cholera in Sandusky”).

Newspaper coverage of the cholera at mid-century typically focused on isolated, local cases. The bone-chilling account written by George Lippard about Poe’s final visit to Philadelphia is one such example. Supposedly, Poe was ill, destitute, and lost: “[H]e went from door to door, but everybody was out of town. It



Masthead of the Akron Summit Beacon. Ohio History Connection.

was a wretched day; cholera bulletins upon every newspaper door, and a hot sun pouring down over half deserted streets.” “If you fail me,” Poe wrote to Lippard, “I can do nothing but die” (Eaves). Poe’s solemn plea for assistance in escaping Philadelphia is but one anecdote of the widespread suffering endured by Americans during the 1849 cholera outbreak.

False reports minimizing the danger of the cholera were also published with the intention of increasing tourism and maintaining local economies (Galishoff). Historical equivalents of press releases from state health boards were also published in local papers. Walter J. Daly notes that even “divine punishment” was cited as a cause, both by the public and by physicians. In addition, “the intemperate, the wicked (particularly in 1832), and the impoverished (especially Irish immigrants in 1849)” were most often targets of scathing letters to newspaper editors (Daly). Such stories, however, did not often attend to the scale of the epidemic.

As newspapers increased the number and variety of comments published on the cholera, so did local medical communities. Many American physicians continued to bleed patients and prescribe drugs such as calomel in combination with household spices (Rosenberg 152). Furthermore, when traditional prescriptions failed to

produce results, doctors “seized upon the novel, upon anything which promised a cure” (152).

Akron’s canal system and proximity to Lake Erie powered the numerous farming, textile, coal, and engineering communities there (Miller 5–6). Although the town’s population was in the low thousands, *The Summit Beacon* published scholarship on the cholera that had already been reviewed and published in international medical and scientific communities. These kinds of news reports included pragmatic measures for people living in urban areas, which is where the disease was most prevalent. In more populated areas, sewage could pollute the drinking water as heavy rains, for example, flooded cesspools and streets and drained into open wells. The public was often quick to blame cholera epidemics on people who came from other places, but the epidemics were only made possible by grossly inadequate infrastructure.

As naturalists and sanitarians could more accurately describe the various causes, symptoms, and holistic treatments for the cholera on a global scale, city infrastructure changes and improvements in public health were also more widely reported. Based on emerging medical research in London, John Griscom’s *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York* (1849) advocated for housing reform to provide citizens with living quarters that were properly aerated, in addition to removing the filth and squalor rampant in dwellings throughout the city (1–25).

Daniel Drake, a naturalist from Cincinnati, consulted with numerous patients and doctors throughout Ohio (Shapiro). His claim that illness was never an isolated incident in an individual’s life appears to pre-date

the establishment of holistic medical practices (Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine). Much like Griscom, Drake considered “the character and extent of municipal responsibility for public health, especially in response to the cholera epidemic” (Shapiro).

The letters that Drake wrote to readers of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* do make liberal use of harrowing local tales. However, Drake also cites current medical information, including suggestions from William Alcott’s *The Library of Health and Teacher on the Human Constitution* and Sarah Hale’s *The Good Housekeeper*. It is no surprise, then, that John Teesdale printed these letters from Drake along with reports of emerging cholera research discovered and endorsed globally.

Note on the Texts

To faithfully and carefully preserve these texts in this edition, the original articles were first transcribed as they appeared in print. Later, the texts were then edited for clarity and consistency to make the texts more accessible for modern readers. Finally, a few notes on specific terminology were added to adapt the text for modern readers.

The collection of three articles authored by Daniel Drake entitled “Epidemic Cholera” that appear in this edition come from the series as it was printed in *The Summit Beacon*’s May 23, 1849, volume. This collection has been copied and compiled from three separate issues of *The Cincinnati Daily Gazette* published on May 10–12, 1849. The version of the articles that appear in this edition have been edited for clarity in punctuation, especially in the use of em dashes be-

tween phrases in a series, as well as for consistency in formatting, such as the use of italics for emphasis. With respect to the article from May 11, the text has been edited, in one instance, for clarity in phrasing. Furthermore, these texts have been emended to account for a recurring foul case error where the “f” was replaced with the “t” in words such as “if.”

The article “Sanitary Regulations for Cholera” that appears in this edition comes from the May 16, 1849, volume of *The Summit Beacon*. The article printed in *The Summit Beacon* is an exact copy taken from *The Louisville Courier* with some differences in the formatting of the quotation from the editor of the London *Lancet*; the article in the *Courier* is a compilation of quotes extracted from *The Louisville Journal of Medicine and Surgery* regarding sanitary measures to prevent the spread of the cholera epidemic. The version of the article that appears in this edition has been edited for consistency in the formatting of publication titles, spacing between punctuation marks, and use of quotation marks between paragraphs; furthermore, this version has been emended to account for a single foul case error that appears in the word “minute” of the original text.

Drake’s letter titled “Epidemic Cholera—Traveling” that appears in this edition comes from the July 11, 1849, volume of *The Summit Beacon*. The article, as it is printed in *The Summit Beacon*, was directly copied from the *Cincinnati Commercial*. The date at the bottom of Drake’s letter indicates that it was published on or after June 12, 1849. This text has only been edited for consistency and clarity in punctuation.

From the *Daily Cincinnati Gazette*
EPIDEMIC CHOLERA

To the people of Cincinnati: The publication of the Board of Health, and the weekly report of the Trustees of the Hospital, in yesterday's Daily Gazette, having shown that the Cholera has at length begun to prevail among us as an epidemic, I propose to say a few words on certain points in which all have a deep interest.

In the first place, then, *let no one leave the city* because the epidemic has come.—In whatever unknown manner that disorder travels from country to country, it is not, like smallpox, a catching disease; if it were, going out of the city would be a preservative. As in 1832, the cases which have now occurred, were in various retired parts of the city, and largely among women and children, who had been in no degree exposed to boats, railroad stations, or hotels, where they could have caught any disease. In fact, the cause has spread *through* the city, and already been received into the bodies of its inhabitants—old and young—rich and poor, and they who escape to the country and are likely—more likely—to be ill, than if they remained at home. The true and safest course is for families and friends to draw closer than common, and watch over and assist each other.

In the second place, it ought to be known, that Epidemic Cholera has no *preliminary* symptoms. When the sentinel on the walls of a fortified city fires his gun, it is a premonition that an enemy is at hand—when there is a circle around the moon, it is a premonitory sign of a storm; but Cholera attacks without *any* premonition. We are accustomed to apply the word Chol-

era to a summer disease of our own climate, which generally *begins* with *vomiting*, or that symptom and diarrhea combined; and have, therefore, fallen into the fatal error of regarding the *first stage* of Epidemic Cholera, as a fore-runner of *the* disease. Every man, woman, and child, ought to know that, from the moment when the diarrhea sets in, the Cholera is as positively present as when it has advanced to vomiting, or coldness and collapse. When one shingle sends up smoke, the roof is as positively on fire as when the flames light up the city. The man who should stand still when he saw the smoke, saying it was only a premonitory sign that his house might be on fire after a while, would be regarded as insane; yet his absurdity would be no greater than that of the individual who does not regard himself as laboring under *the Cholera* from the moment the diarrhea begins.

In the third place, it may be declared as a fact, that the disease may generally be stopped, if met in the early stage; at all events, if it cannot then be put an end to, it cannot afterwards. It will run its course, and the patient may or may not recover, according to his constitution. But let no one believe that this first, mild stage can be successfully treated if the patient continues on his feet. His life depends on his lying by—no medicines can succeed if he should not. They may check it for the moment, and delude him into a fatal security, but can go no farther.

In the fourth place, all persons who have worn flannel during the winter should keep it on until the epidemic has passed away. They may put on cooler clothing, but

should not throw off what they have worn next to the surface of the body.

Tomorrow, these practical remarks will be extended. Meanwhile, I may say, that they most certainly express the experience and settled opinions of the medical professionals, both in Europe and this country.

DANIEL DRAKE, M. D.
Cincinnati, May 10, 1849.

From the *Cincinnati Gazette*
EPIDEMIC CHOLERA

To the people of Cincinnati:

I briefly pointed out yesterday, in the public prints, that no one should leave the city for the purposes of escaping the Cholera, that it is not a disease which has premonitory symptoms, but that it is present from the beginning of the diarrhea, which is its first stage; that early treatment and rest are indispensable to its cure; and that warm clothing should not be laid aside till the epidemic shall have passed away.

The last opinion relates to the prevention of the disease, and that point I propose now to say a few words.

Strictly speaking, there is no preventive of the Cholera; but all constitutions are not liable to it, any more than all are liable to ague and fever, influenza, or any other form of disease. But although we know of nothing that will prevent the disease, we know of many things which can and do bring it on after the poison has been taken into the system. These are *exciting causes* and ought to be carefully avoided. The disease will, howev-

er, assail some constitutions, notwithstanding all exciting causes may be avoided.

Of the exciting causes, one has just been mentioned—the premature laying aside of flannel clothing. In addition to this (and belonging to the head) getting wet in a shower, remaining long in damp places, sitting in a strong current of air at night, and sleeping with but little bed covering, should be carefully avoided. Every sitting and lodging room ought to have a fire in it for a part of every day, especially for a few hours before occupying it. Thus, the shop, office, family sitting room, church, and schoolhouse should have fires kindled in them early in the morning, and kept up for two or three hours; but this is still more necessary in lodging rooms, which should be warmed and dried by brisk fires, kindled in the early part of the evening, and allowed to burn down before bedtime.

A second class of exciting causes is connected with diet. Loading the stomach with any kind of food, especially at night, may bring on the disease; and omitting to eat at the usual time might do the same thing.—Much reduction in the quantity of food (the individual still being in health,) is not proper. In fact, a *nourishing diet* is best; but it should be plain and digestible. Meat or boiled eggs should be eaten every day.—Boiled ham, corned beef, corned mutton, well seasoned beefsteak, and poultry, are the best. On the whole, salted meats are more proper than fresh; and all should be well seasoned. Veal, fresh pork, and fresh fish should be avoided. Of salt fish, mackerel and salmon are too hard; but codfish with potatoes is proper. Old cheese is safe; and macaroni prepared with cheese may be eaten.

Hot bread¹ should be avoided—stale bread, or crackers only, should be used.—Of culinary vegetables, mealy potatoes, well boiled hominy and rice, are not only the best, but all others had better be omitted. Pies, tarts, and all kinds of pastry are improper, except, perhaps, well baked and highly spiced ginger-bread.

Of drinks, sweet milk, tea, coffee, and chocolate may be taken as usual. Those who drink malt liquors at their meals should limit themselves to freshly brewed strong beer, well hopped. As to brandy and *whisky*, they cannot prevent Cholera. They who are in the habit of using either should not lay it aside; but *they should avoid all excess*. They who have not such a habit should by no means begin now. The use of brandy in the treatment of disease must not be confounded with its use as a preventative. The irritation of the stomach and bowels produced by the first impress of alcoholic drinks may even contribute to bring on the disease, and sour wines are still likely to have effect.

DAN. DRAKE, M.D.

Cincinnati, May 11, 1849.

From the *Daily Cincinnati Gazette*

EPIDEMIC CHOLERA.

To the People of Cincinnati: When the Cholera prevailed here in 1832, some persons who most carefully

1. According to Sarah Hale's *The Good Housekeeper*, "hot bread," or unleavened bread, is the most frequent cause of dyspepsia and is more difficult to digest, which Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald also note in *America's Founding Food* (Hale 119; Stavely & Fitzgerald 239). However, a review of N.A. Michael Eskin's *Biochemistry of Foods* does not reveal any particular element of bread leavening that would exacerbate digestion.

refrained from everything that was said to be an exciting cause fell victim to it; and thus, many were led to suppose that it was a matter of indifference whether they observed any rules or not. But this was a very bad conclusion. Such cases can be explained away.

First. When any disease is Epidemic, there are individuals whose constitutions so pre-dispose them to it, that they will be attacked, and, perhaps, destroyed, let them live as they may.

Second. One reason, with many persons, why the warning against exciting causes was so rigidly observed at that time, was their *terror* of the disease. Now, that terror was, and ever will be, one of the greatest of all the exciting causes; and hence, while the subjects of it were, as they supposed, scrupulously avoiding the *whole*, they were unconsciously cherishing one of the most mischievous. This terror sometimes made the disorder seem to be catching. Thus, at the period when the particular remote cause was every where present, and acting on the systems of the people, but not with sufficient force to produce the disease, a traveller would be taken down with it among strangers, and, the next day, or even in a few hours, some one who had been near him would be seized with the complaint, having, as was supposed, *caught* it, when in fact, it had been excited by fear in those who were already pre-disposed to it.

Through the whole of that epidemic this emotion of fear was very strong and widely spread, for the disease was new, and was regarded as a dreadful pestilence. I have no doubt that this emotion greatly increased the mortality. The present epidemic has inspired much less terror, both in Europe and the United States, and has

been much less fatal. I cannot doubt that its diminished prevalence and mortality should be ascribed, in part, at least, to an abatement in the dread which the epidemic then spread throughout all the countries west of India. The danger now is, that this abatement may render many persons indifferent to what they ought to do; for, in the matter of preserving health, by regulating and governing their appetites, or suspending their business, the majority of persons do nothing till they are frightened. If they are not alarmed, they do what will bring on the disease; if they are so alarmed as to act prudently and wisely, their terror then is apt to excite it. To act discreetly, without being scared into it, is the true wisdom.

There are causes which predispose to the disease, as well as causes which excite it.—I will mention one—an *infirm* or *disordered state of the bowels*. Every person who labors under chronic diarrhea should consider himself more likely to be attacked than if such were not his condition. Hence it is, that a large proportion of those who served long in Mexico², especially on the southern line, where the heat was great, will be liable to the disease, and should not only, more carefully than others, avoid all exciting causes, but should report to medical aid at an earlier hour of the attack, for their danger is greater.

DAN DRAKE, M.D.

Cincinnati, May 12, 1849.

2. Drake is likely referring to people who fought in the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1847 (Yaudes).

SANITARY REGULATIONS FOR CHOLERA

The *Louisville Courier* copies the following sanitary regulations from the forthcoming number of the *Louisville Journal of Medicine and Surgery*. Common sense, experience and observation have abundantly testified to the value of these regulations.

The editor of the London *Lancet*³ says:

“These simple measures are worth all the nostrums or specifics which have ever been vaunted for the cure of Asiatic Cholera.”

The quotations we make are exactly conformable to the laws of malaria, and show a more triumphant proof of the accuracy of the doctrine of the malarious origin of Cholera. Here are the sanitary regulations of London, based upon one of the most minute investigations that ever was made into the circumstances attendant on an epidemic disease:

“Let every impurity, animal or vegetable, be quickly removed to a distance from the habitations, such as slaughter houses, pig sties, and all other domestic nuisances.”

We do not believe that animal putrefactions are ever connected with epidemic diseases, but there can be no objection in their removal from habitations.

“Let all uncovered drains be carefully and frequently cleaned.

“Let the grounds in and around the habitations be drained, so as effectually to carry off moisture of every kind.

3. *The Lancet* is one of the most prestigious British medical journals still in publication today.

“Let all partitions be removed from within and without habitations which unnecessarily impede ventilation.

“Let every room be thrown open for the admission of fresh air; and this should be done about noon, when the atmosphere is most likely to be dry.

“Let dry scrubbing be used in domestic cleaning, in place of water cleaning.

“Let excessive fatigue and exposure to damp and cold, especially during the night, be avoided.

“Let the use of cold drinks and cold liquors, especially under fatigue, be avoided; or when the body is heated.

“Let a poor diet, and the use of impure water in cooking or for drink, be avoided.

“Let a flannel or wool belt be worn around the belly.

“N.B.⁴ This has been found serviceable in checking the tendency to bowel complaint, so common during the prevalence of cholera. The disease has, in this country, has been found to commence with a looseness in the bowels, and in this stage is very tractable; it should, however, be noticed that the looseness is frequently attended by no pain or uneasiness; and fatal delay has often occurred from the notion that cholera must be attended with cramps. In the early stages here referred to, there is often no griping or cramp, and it is at this period that the disease can be most easily arrested.

“Let personal cleanliness be carefully observed.

“Let every cause tending to depress the moral and physical energies be carefully avoided; let exposure to extremes of heat and cold be avoided.

4. *Nota bene*; this is a Latin term that translates to “take note” or “please note” in present-day English.

“Let crowding of persons within houses and apartments be avoided.

“Let sleeping in low or damp rooms be avoided.

“Let fires be kept up during the night in sleeping or adjoining apartments, the night being the period of most danger from attack.

“Let all bedding and clothing be daily exposed during winter and spring to the fire, and in summer to the heat of the sun.”

From the *Cincinnati Commercial*
EPIDEMIC CHOLERA—TRAVELING

To the people of Cincinnati:

In a short paper, two or three weeks since, I gave a professional opinion against leaving the city to avoid the cholera. Every day's observation has convinced me of the correctness of the advice, and at the same time shown, that the tendency to fly is strong, and that the danger of being taken down with the disease does not deter those who had planned excursions of business or pleasure, from carrying them out. It may be well then to explain how and why it is that those who travel at this time, are in more danger from the epidemic, than if they remained at home.

They cannot regulate their diet; and as travelling generally increases the appetite, they are in danger of occasionally eating too much, as well as of things improper to be eaten when their systems are imbued with cholera poison.

They are liable to lose sleep, and few things would be more likely to invite an attack than the weariness produced by this cause.

Traveling is apt to occasional constipation of the bowels. It is a fatal error, that such a habit is a preservation against that disease. It is only better that the opposite condition. Safety lies in a perfect regularity as much as possible without the aid of medicine.

But there is another source of danger in traveling, greater than all these taken together. It is the motion of the vehicle; be it steamboat, single coach, or railroad car; but especially the two former. The rocking and swinging of a stage coach or a boat, tends to disturb the stomach.—Many persons cannot ride in the former without being made sick. Those who voyage upon the lakes are very generally made sick. On the Ohio and Mississippi rivers the motion produces less effect, but it is far from being harmless. It renders the stomach irritable, if it had been previously acted upon by the remote cause of cholera and thus tends to bring on an attack, which might not have occurred at all if the person had remained home in his ordinary business. It also brings on earlier and more fatal vomiting, than would otherwise take place. The mortality on board our steamboats has been frightful.—

Many of them have, in a few days, lost a tenth part of all who were on board. This has been ascribed to want of timely attention. That want would explain the great mortality in proportion to the number of sick; but as the disease is not contagious, it does not count for the great number of cases. One of the Pittsburgh

packets⁵, which left here three or four days ago, lost seven of her passengers or crew before she reached that place. I know not the number of persons on board, but supposing it to be 176, the loss would be 4 out of 100. The difference needs no comment. One of the victims of the voyage just mentioned was a young lady from the East, the daughter of a deceased naval officer of high rank whose family, in a state of alarm, had written to her to return. Her friends here urged her to remain—a physician warned her against steamboat traveling—but she persevered: She left here in perfect health and a telegraphic communication from Wheeling, last evening, announced that she was brought into that city a corpse, from cholera. Had she remained here she would have been less likely to be attacked, and had the disease seized her, it might by that timely aid which cannot be had on steamboats, have been arrested, and her life preserved.

Those who desire to take country exercise, should make excursions and return the same day or next. A trip to and from Fort Ancient, Xenia, the Yellow Springs, or Springfield, may be made in one day, and refreshing exercise be had without getting far from home—safe home. While the pestilence prevails, every man's house, whether it be a cabin or a mansion, should be regarded as his citadel—there he can best contend with the destroyer.

DAN DRAKE M.D.

Cincinnati, June 12, 1849

5. Here, "packet" is short for "packet-boat," which was a small ship originally meant to carry parcels of mail ("packet-boat, n.").

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