

This timeline originally appeared in the July 2007 issue of *Michigan's Habitant Heritage* in an article titled "A Tribute to Jean Baptiste Dumouchel – Part 2", by Diane Wolford Sheppard

The 1832 and 1834 Cholera Epidemics in the Detroit River Area
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In June 1832, when news of the arrival of the cholera epidemic to Canada and the United States reached the Western District of Upper Canada and Detroit, officials began to take immediate action.¹ On 25 June, the Detroit Board of Health issued printed instructions for the prevention and cure of cholera. The instructions included a list of medicines and specific dosage amounts for adults as well as children. The mayor of Detroit attached to the instructions, regulations regarding boat and ship traffic in the Detroit River. The regulations forbade ships from any other port to come closer than 100 yards to Detroit's shores, passengers could not disembark until after they had been inspected by a health officer, and prohibited anyone from crossing from the Canadian shore to Detroit.² The following day, the magistrates in the Western District of Upper Canada held an emergency session where they issued a number of ideas designed to stop the epidemic's outbreak. Although the orders revealed that they had a basic understanding of conditions that spread diseases, they also revealed their ignorance of the specific causes and treatments for cholera. The magistrates ordered residents to clean and whitewash their homes, while the cleaning of privies added the additional step of adding lime to the whitewash. Property owners were also ordered to clean their yards, fill or drain stagnant pools and cut ditches which would allow the Detroit River to flow into low lying inland marshes. St Amour was ordered to remove and scuttle his horse boat; no "tippling" was allowed in inns and taverns closed at 8:00 p.m.³

On 27-28 June 1832, the magistrates in Canada appointed boards of health; ordered that hospitals be opened in Bois Blanc Island and in the Western District Grammar School in Sandwich. The following day they established the new position of apothecary and chemist, who was responsible for preparing medicines for the district. Following the lead of Detroit, the justices of the Quarter Sessions, forbade anyone from crossing the River from Detroit to Canada. In subsequent sessions, magistrates were authorized to prevent anyone suspected of being infected from entering the area. Guards were placed on Baby's wharf to prevent anyone from crossing the Detroit River.⁴

4 July 1832, the *Henry Clay*, a steamer carrying 370 troops to Chicago for the Black Hawk War, stopped in Detroit. The following day, one of the soldiers died. Detroit official reacted by ordering the ship to leave the area. It moored on Belle Isle for a few days before proceeding to Fort Gratiot (the future Port Huron, Sault Saint Marie, Michilimackinac, and eventually Chicago).⁵

July 1832, during the trip from Belle Isle to Fort Gratiot, so many soldiers had succumbed to cholera, that they were all ordered to disembark and to return to Detroit. While en route to Detroit, almost 220 soldiers died; the remaining 150 soldiers reached Detroit on 8 July. The remaining soldiers embarked on the *William Penn*, but cholera continued to ravage the group, so they camped at Springwells until the epidemic subsided.⁶

¹ R. Alan Douglas, *Uppermost Canada The Western District and the Detroit Frontier 1800-1850* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press. 2001), p 224. Douglas states that cholera had already been reported in the area, but it is obvious from other sources cited below that the June orders in both communities were precautionary in nature.

² Silas Farmer, *The History of Detroit and Michigan* (Detroit, Michigan: Silas Farmer & Co. 1884), p. 48, Douglas, p. 225.

³ Douglas, p. 224.

⁴ Douglas, p. 225.

⁵ George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit* (Detroit, Michigan: The Gabriel Richard Press. 1951), p. 380; Farmer, p. 48.

⁶ Farmer, p. 48.

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July – Aug 1832, throughout the settlements in Southeastern Michigan, officials and residents took whatever steps they thought would protect them from cholera, including building fences, stopping all visitors, inspecting passengers in coaches, posting armed sentries on all roads to a community and throwing strangers out of inns. By 15 August, 96 people had died in Detroit which "could be traced in most instances to intemperance and carelessness."⁷

14 July 1832, since it was impossible to stop anyone from crossing the Detroit River as long as the River front residents owned any kind of watercraft, all owners of any kind of watercraft on the Canadian side were ordered to bring their boats and canoes to Sandwich.⁸

3 August 1832, Marie Marguerite Dumouchel's husband, Charles Ouellette, died of cholera in the future Windsor.⁹

By 15 August 1832, 96 people had died in Detroit.¹⁰

13 September 1832, Fr. Gabriel Richard, who showed the first signs of illness on 8 September, died of cholera in Detroit.¹¹

11 October 1832, the worst of the cholera epidemic had ended by the end of the summer, therefore on 11 October, the magistrates of the Western District ordered that all remaining medical equipment in the hospitals be stored in the jury room for safekeeping. A total of 53 cases of cholera, resulting in 29 deaths or 55% of those infected in the area from Sandwich to Dover Township on the Thames, had been reported to the Board of Health.¹²

1833, although far less fatal than cholera, a smallpox epidemic broke out in the French Canadian communities of Amherstburg, Sandwich, Windsor and Dover and eventually spread to other areas in the Western District. By mid-December, approximately 100 cases, resulting in about 12 deaths, had been reported in Amherstburg.¹³

Late July 1834, Fr. Martin Kundig asked Alpheus White, who had recently purchased the old Presbyterian church and moved it to Cadillac Square so that he could remodel the church for a new Catholic Church for the Irish community, for the temporary use of the church as a hospital. White agreed to Fr. Kundig's request; at that time, there were no hospitals in the city to care for cholera victims. White and his workers helped convert the Church into two rooms, one for the men and the other for the women. Fr. Kuhn, White, his workers, the Sisters of St. Clare and members of the Catholic Female Benevolent Society cared for the sick. Although we cannot identify these women precisely, some of them came from the following French Canadian families: Beaubien, Campeau, Dequindre, Desnoyers, and Moran.¹⁴

On 10 Aug 1834, the first case of cholera in the Western District was reported in Sandwich; six days later the disease had spread to Dover. The boards of health hastily convened and started the immediate purchase of medicines. All doctors were authorized to dispense medicines. The poor were given

⁷ Farmer, pp. 48-49.

⁸ Douglas, p. 225.

⁹ Denissen, p. 441 – he gives the burial date of 4 August; SFOHG. *Sépultures Paroisse L'Assomption de Windsor, Ontario 1768-1985*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Farmer, pp. 48-49

¹¹ Paré, p. 384.

¹² Douglas, p 226.

¹³ Douglas, p 226.

¹⁴ Paré, pp. 410-411, 658.

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medicines *gratis*, and the local priests were given medicines to dispense to their poor parishioners, although all others were required to pay for the medicines. The second epidemic was far worse than the first; newspapers reported 62 deaths in Sandwich and 26 in Amherstburg alone.¹⁵

30 September 1834, by the end of the month, 700 people had fallen ill with cholera in Detroit. Although we do not know the total number of deaths, 7% of Detroit's population died in one month. During the previous three months, business was virtually suspended, grass grew in the streets, and lit tar barrels which were thought to disinfect the air lit the streets.¹⁶

¹⁵ Douglas, pp. 226-227.

¹⁶ Paré, p. 409, Farmer, p. 49.