

The No Names

Cemetery

by Terry Catalano

After three long days of diligent hiking and searching, my dog Max and I found our quest. We scoured the hillsides of Provincetown, just bordering the National Seashore, following overgrown trails that lead to nowhere. I did not expect a difficult hunt, but it was not until I received accurate directions from Bill Burke, Historian and Ranger at the National Seashore, that I finally reach my goal: The No Names Cemetery.

In the early 1800s, mid 1850's and early 1870's, Provincetown and many other seaport communities faced an epidemic: Smallpox. There were at least 16 deaths on record attributed to this disease.

Provincetown at the time was a major fishing port. Seamen, fishermen, sailors and vacationers flocked to this tiny hook of land, coming from all walks of life and countries, unfortunately bringing with them many unknown diseases and viruses. It is no small wonder that there were not more deaths attributed to this disease. On research, there were probably many more, but due to shame, embarrassment, and possibility of being outcast, many of these deaths were recorded under different reasons (sounds similar to AIDS in the early 1980's).

In the 1850's there was a vaccine, but as with AIDS, fear and mistrust of western medicine probably hindered many people from seeking treatment. Especially when the fear was coupled with the fact that infected people were sent to a small shack called the Pest House, in the forest of the National Seashore (Town land at the time). This shack which measured 8' by 10' (The foundation hole can still be seen) was built well away from the town. In 1873 notes indicated that conditions at the Pest House were deplorable. Outcast and shunned by the general public, the sick were kept in the shack until they either died or were cured. In fact, their only solace was the presence of a doctor and a lonely nurse.

(who were forbidden from leaving the property for fear of spreading the disease) and of the other sick people.

Some sources at the Provincetown Library indicate very interesting timing in the many deaths from this disease. Most seem to have occurred in May and in November, in spring and at Thanksgiving. How scary that must have been for the people of Provincetown to look ahead to the upcoming summer or the fall holiday only to be faced with the fear of possibly catching what was, most certainly at the time, a deadly disease.

When I finally came to the spot where one still finds a few markers—tombstones with numbers, not names—of the people who passed away from this disease, I felt an odd chill. The survivors used numbers rather than names so that families whose loved ones rested there would remain anonymous. I could only reflect on the similarities in the early years of AIDS and cancer to understand how we treat loved ones who pass away from cruel diseases.

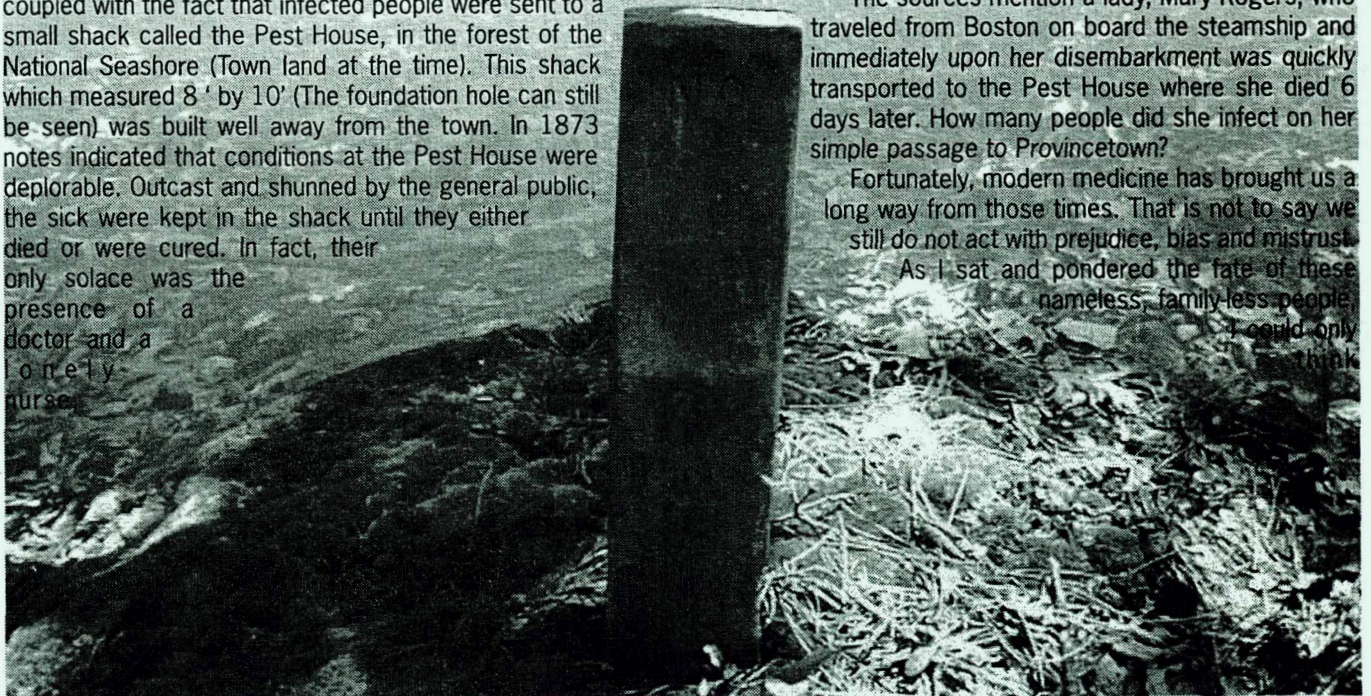
There are only four visible markers with numbers on them. The others have been either stolen or broken. The whole area is just wild with brambles, pine trees and litter. The spot seemed very forlorn, remote and forgotten. Funny how even today, with a lack of knowledge and education, we still treat deaths attributed to misunderstood causes in relatively the same way. All of their possessions were burned or buried to prevent the spread of the disease.

The sources mention a lady, Mary Rogers, who traveled from Boston on board the steamship and immediately upon her disembarkment was quickly transported to the Pest House where she died 6 days later. How many people did she infect on her simple passage to Provincetown?

Fortunately, modern medicine has brought us a long way from those times. That is not to say we still do not act with prejudice, bias and mistrust.

As I sat and pondered the fate of these nameless, family-less people,

I could only think



SMALLPOX CEMETERY

a brief history of the smallpox cemetery
and 'pest' house in Provincetown

Although a vaccination for smallpox existed in the last century, most people in rural areas still had not been vaccinated. Because smallpox was often fatal or disfiguring, it was considered with horror. Contributing to this universal fear was the fact that smallpox was extremely contagious, being carried in the clothes of the victim.

In Provincetown the first recorded epidemic was in 1801. At that time a house was set aside to quarantine the patients. This house was at the site of the Grace Goveia Building. The Board of Health put very strict rules into place in the town. During the early 1800's the cases were few and often came from boats which made a landfall in Provincetown. This was a time when Provincetown entered a time of its largest development and growth in population. Most of the commercial life of the town centered around its location surrounded by the sea and its proximity to the great ports on the eastern seaboard.

In 1848, the incidence of smallpox in the town inspired the board of health to set aside a tract of land away from the town for a new quarantine house or 'pest' house in order to isolate any new cases of smallpox. Also a site was prepared for a small cemetery so that the bodies of the dead could be buried immediately and in a remote location. These graves were marked only by a small stone marker which bore a number. Usually no religious rites were performed. The person, by having the misfortune to die of smallpox, ceased to exist even in the memory of the town.

With such a stigma attached to this disease, it wasn't too hard to explain the panic and gloom that attacked the town when smallpox again increased in 1872. Contributing to the board of health's difficulties was the fact that people were afraid to report cases as they appeared. When discovered, it was difficult to find someone willing to transport the patient to the pest house or to bury the bodies after they died. In fact, the wife of one of the members of the board of health, Tamsin Manuel, died of smallpox after her husband visited the pest house and contracted the disease and gave it to her. Her husband, using his position, had her declared a victim of a heart attack so she could have a Christian burial in the town cemetery.

Dr. Horatio G. Newton was assigned to the epidemic and was appalled when he visited the pest house and found the conditions disgraceful. In all, there were twenty two patients at the pest house in 1872. Of these, six died and were buried in the smallpox cemetery. The numbers on the markers are assumed to correspond to the numbers as recorded in the Book of Deaths. Following is a list of their names.

1. Adam Dyer died May 9, 1855 age 22 born Truro, MA., laborer; married; son of Adam Dyer
2. John Roberts died May 15, 1855 age and parents not listed, birthplace unknown.
3. Monson W. Barnard died May 19, 1855 age, parents and birthplace unknown.
4. Elizabeth Hill died May 20, 1860 age 51 born Truro, MA., married, wife of Ambrose Hill and daughter of John and Salome Hill; buried Provincetown.
5. Kennis Fergerson died May 20, 1864; male; age 22; single; mariner; parents and birthplace unknown.
6. Antone Domingo died Nov. 1, 1872 age 22; widower; mariner; born Western Islands; parents not listed;
7. Mary Rogers died Nov. 8, 1872 age 25; widow; born Western Islands; daughter of Frank and Ann. (According to the 1872 town report she arrived from Boston by steamer on Nov. 2 and was removed to the smallpox house)
8. George G. Hallett died Nov 26, 1872 age 31 yrs. 9 mos., born Barnstable, MA; married; carpenter; son of Nathaniel and Mary D. Hallett
9. Tamsin Manuel died Nov. 27, 1872 age 73 yrs. 29 days, born Orleans, MA; married; daughter of Aquilla and Tamsin Higgins; wife of Alexander Manuel.
10. Frank Sofrine (alias Small) died Dec. 24, 1872, age, birthplace and parents not given.
11. Manuel Terceira died Dec. 24, 1872 at the smallpox house
12. William H. Butler died Jan 7, 1873 at the smallpox house.
13. John a McDonald died Jan. 8, 1873 at the smallpox house; a scotsman.
14. Thomas Bussell died May 28, 1873 at the smallpox house; of Portsmouth, New Hampshire; arrived in Provincetown on board the schooner Louisa A. of Boston on May 17, 1873. Buried in the burial ground in the rear of hospital.

As far as we can tell, these are the people who were buried in the smallpox cemetery. Some came by sea but others hold familiar local names. There used to be 14 small stone markers. Of these only about six remain. They are on a small rise of land in the middle of a remote swamp. A few feet in front is all that remains of the pest house, a round hole in the ground. The area is overgrown with bushes and brambles. It is a quiet and peaceful spot, sheltered by the first rise of the dunes.

Several attempts have been made to clean up this cemetery and to erect some kind of commemorative monument but with no success. On learning of this history and becoming intrigued, we have decided to try again. The site now lies within the seashore park and they would be willing to clean up the area if some funds are dedicated for this purpose. so we have formed a committee to try to get this project off the ground. Please call us at either of the numbers listed below if you can help us.

It is impossible not to be touched by this story especially in this time when again we are in the grips of a deadly and frightening epidemic. At least we don't abandon the victims and erase them from our memory.

One further note; there is an untold story in the struggle of the doctor appointed to handle the epidemic. Dr. Horatio G. Newton was an unsung hero who seems to have eradicated smallpox in Provincetown by 1873.

produced by

The Committee to Clean Up the Smallpox Cemetery

Constance Black 487-4741

George Bryant 487-0657

Provincetown Small Pox Cemetery

The original epidemic of smallpox began in 1801. Two stones were originally located on a farm and now a part of St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery about 75 ft inside the Northwest Corner of St. Peter's.

The inscription as follows:

In memory of Mr. Edward Cook who died of smallpox Nov 11, 1801, aged 55 years.

In memory of Mrs. Experience Cook wife of Mr. Edward Cook who died of the small-pox Dec 19, 1801, age 54 years.

In 1848 smallpox again appeared. The Provincetown Selectmen set aside "a certain tract of land commonly known as "Eastern Plain" on which was built a one story dwelling to be used as a smallpox house which became known as the "Pest House". The land surrounding this hospital was later used for burial of the smallpox victims. There were four deaths between 1855 and 1864, but in 1872 a smallpox epidemic again arose.

On Dec 4, 1872 Horatio G. Newton M.D. was appointed by the Board of Health as Consulting physician. He was an experienced Doctor and introduced vaccination using "pure cow lymph," and used isolation against the disease as a weapon. Much due to his efforts Provincetown was free of smallpox by 1873.

Upon describing the existing hospital conditions he wrote "The poorest and most disgraceful one was that owned by the town, known as the Pest House, a place to which no patient will hereafter be sent with my consent, for I should never be willing to go there if I were sick."

In 1872 there were 22 patients placed there, but surprisingly only six of whom did not recover.

It was difficult in finding people to carry the patients to the Pest House and to carry the bodies of the dead to the burial place.

All that remains of this experience are fourteen numbered grave markers which were placed in a semicircle North West, and a hole where the foundation of the Pest House was.

The list of people that were buried there are as follows:

1. Vol 1 pg 18: Adam Dyer, died May 9, 1855, age 22, born Truro, Mass; laborer; married; buried Provincetown; son of Adam Dyer.
2. Vol 1 pg 18: John Roberts, died May 15, 1855 age and parents not listed; birth place unknown buried Provincetown.
3. Vol 1 pg 18: Mmes W. Barnard, died May 19, 1855, age; parents and birth place unknown, buried Provincetown.
4. Vol 1 pg 24: Elizabeth Hill died May 20, 1860 age 51; born Truro, Ma; married, wife of Ambrose Hill and daughter of John and Salome Hill; buried Provincetown.

5. Vol. 2 pg 61: Kennis Ferguson died May 20 1864; male; age 22; single; married; parents and birthplace unknown; buried Provincetown
6. Vol 2 pg 22: Antone Domingo died Nov. 1, 1872; age 22; widower; married; born Western Islands; parents not listed; buried Provincetown
7. Vol 2 pg 22: Mary Rogers died Nov 8, 1872 age 25; widow; born Western Islands; daughter of Frank and Ann; buried Provincetown (according to the 1872 Town Report of the Board of Health, she arrived from Boston by steamer on Nov 2, and was removed to the smallpox house.)
8. Vol 2 pg 22: George L. Hallett died Nov. 26, 1872, age 31 yrs. 9 months, born Barnstable, Mass.; ~~died Nov 26, 1872~~ married; Carpenter; son of Nathaniel and Mary L. Hallett, buried Provincetown.
9. Vol 2 pg 22: Tamsin Manuel died Nov 27, 1872, age 73 yrs 29 days, born Orleans, Mass.; married; daughter of Arquilla and Tamsin Higgins, wife of Alexander Manuel.
10. Vol 2 pg 23: Frank Sofonie (alias Small) died Dec 24, 1872 age; birthplace; and parents unknown.
11. 1872. Manuel Theresa died Dec 24, 1872 at the Smallpox House.
12. 1872: William H. Butler died Jan 7 1873 at the Smallpox House.
13. 1872: John A. McDonald died Jan 8, 1873 at the Small Pox House; a Scotsman

14. 1873: Thomas Russell died May 24, 1873 at the Smallpox House; was of Portsmouth, New Hampshire; arrived in Provincetown on board the Schooner Louisa A. of Salem May 17, 1873 "Buried in the burial ground at the rear of the Hospital"

In 1872 the Board of Health expressed concern about the smallpox cemetery:

"There are, not remote from the Pest House, several graves of those who died of smallpox. Some of them were our own fellow citizens who, under former rules, were excluded from Christian burial within our cemeteries, and some were strangers who, though faithfully and ever tenderly cared for in their last moments, died where no loving hands of relatives or friends could lay their corrupting mortal remains beneath the willow or the cypress, nor strew flowers on their graves. Can we as a Christian and humane community afford to do less, than to have this little consecrated spot properly cleaned up, and neatly fenced, that we thus manifest a fraternal sympathy for that stricken band of our common humanity."

Again in 1873 the Board recommended that "said ground to be taken possession of by the town, properly cleaned up and put in a condition in keeping with with our other public grounds, that the graves be marked in some way with the names of their respective occupants."

This burial lot is located within the bounds of Cape Cod National Seashore Park. It is in a deplorable condition, covered with brush. There are only a few broken pcs of numbered markers to mark the graves.

Cemeterys Superintendent Frank Flores took years to find the burial site. He found it eventually on the North West side of "Evans Field" - just about buried in the wilderness. He made efforts to have the town do something about the disgraceful condition about the graveyard, but nothing was done. He took the matter to the National Seashore. They said "If you will clear up the brush, put a fence around the plot and make it presentable we will maintain it". Again nothing was done.

This is truly a historic site, even if one feels that we shouldn't be sentimental about it. The history and story behind the graveyard is worth keeping for the next generations.

It is the year 2000 and still nothing has been done. These people lived, breathed, and died here. They were daughters and sons, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. They had their stores just as we do. This is the year to do the right thing. We must clear up this gravesite, fence it in, and place a memorial stone with the victims' names on it.

Don't let it be said 50 years from now

"And still nothing was done":

Ernie Stule McShee

* Information for this article taken from
1872-73 town reports

Providence Cemetery Inscriptions Book by

Advocate article dated

COMMENT

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