



The year 2017 marks Fairfax County's 275th Anniversary – check out www.fairfax275.com for a calendar of upcoming events this fall, all celebrating the County's historic birthday!

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Vaccinations for influenza for the 2017-2018 season have already landed at our local drug stores. According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, influenza and pneumonia currently account for roughly 40 percent of deaths from infectious diseases in the U.S. However, overall deaths from all infectious diseases have decreased from about 800 deaths per 100,000 people at the beginning of the 20th century, to 46 deaths per 100,000 people as recorded in 2014. This *Found in the Archives* examines accounts of common deadly infectious diseases in our pre-1900 court records.

A handwritten letter on aged paper. The text reads: "I expected to start for home about the middle of may but in consequence of the cholera in St. Louis and on the river I shal not start so soon but will stay until I hear from you all again."

The most feared infectious diseases in the 19th century were typhoid, cholera and smallpox.

Letter home from Charles F. Riggs, 1850

Cholera, a water-borne disease, appeared in the U.S. in 1832. It was believed to have been brought over by European immigrants who, in turn, had been introduced to it by travelers returning from India. Cholera is a bacterial disease caused by ingesting water containing infected human waste. It causes severe diarrhea that kills its victims through rapid dehydration. Today, cholera can be cured by antibiotics and the symptoms managed by keeping the patient hydrated. In the 19th century, before the discovery and introduction of antibiotics, there was no cure and no way of hydrating a victim.

In 1849, a cholera epidemic broke out in New Orleans; infected people traveling up the Mississippi river brought the disease further north. In May 1850, Charles F. Riggs wrote from St. Louis, Missouri, to his sister in Centreville to tell her that he was going to delay coming home "in consiquence [sic] of the cholera in St. Louis and on the river I shal [sic] not start so

soon." He asked his farm manager to send him money so that he could buy a horse and ride north, instead of traveling by boat. Charles eventually arrived in Centreville, without cholera.

In Fairfax County, other people were not so fortunate. In the first American cholera epidemic of 1832, a freed woman named Charity, living near Gum Springs, died of cholera. She left her very young children, among them Peter French and Fanny Douglas, without adult care. Although Charity was free, her children were not. As a stipulation of a will written in 1801, Charity's mother was emancipated, her children (including Charity) were to be emancipated at the age of 25, and her grandchildren when they reached age 21. Following their mother's death, Peter and Fanny were sold out of the family, were not emancipated on reaching 21, and Fanny's son (who was born free) was enslaved by her master. The siblings sued their masters through Loudoun Circuit Court and their case was moved to Fairfax Circuit Court because of a hung jury in Loudoun and the fact that the original Deed of Manumission was filed in Fairfax.

Without their deceased mother's testimony, Peter and Fanny couldn't prove their ages or their identities, and they fought for years to gain their freedom. Our papers don't tell us if they were emancipated before the Emancipation Proclamation. The *Free Negro Registers* for Fairfax, Loudoun, Alexandria and the District of Columbia don't list Peter, Fanny or her son.

The laboratory of the State Board of Health reports as follows:

"The sample from the public well at Fairfax Court House showed: Bacteria per c.c. 30; B. coli present in test samples of 1 c.c. (15 drops) and 10 c.c. These findings classify this sample as 'bad'".

B. coli or colon bacilli come from the bowels of warm blooded animals. When, therefore, colon bacilli are found in a sample of water, that fact is proof that the water has received the bowel discharge of some warm blooded animal. Where colon bacilli are found in quantities of 1 c.c. (i.e. one cubic centimeter, about 15 drops), the sample is dangerous and is reported bad.

In addition to the fact that colon bacilli have been found in this water and thereby affording an opportunity to cause typhoid fever in this community, it is also a fact that an additional menace to the health of the public is caused by persons using the bucket as a common drinking cup.

Alongside cholera, typhoid was greatly feared in the pre-antibiotic age. Typhoid is spread through contaminated food and water, and causes a high fever, stomach pains and gastrointestinal disturbance, loss of appetite and headaches.

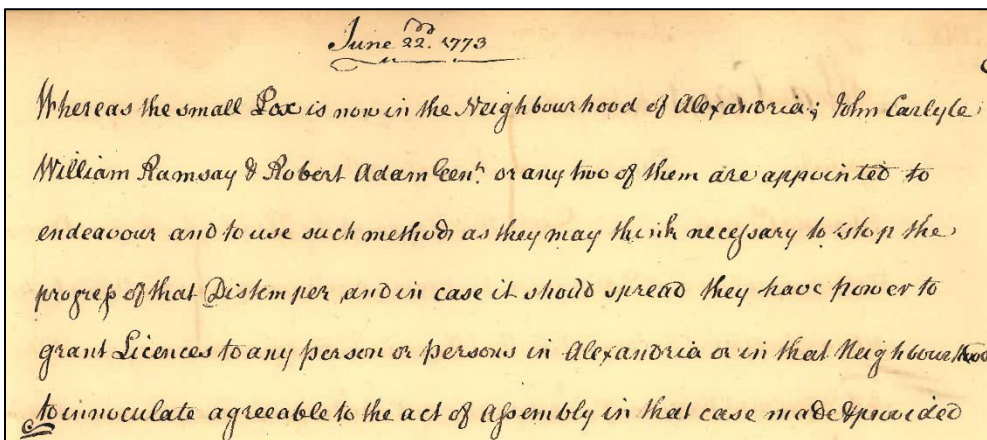
[Letter to Fairfax Circuit Court from the State Board of Health, May 1919](#)

Before antibiotics, 1 in 5 typhoid sufferers died, and treatment was relegated to reducing the fever of the patient.

Some people exposed to typhoid become carriers, without ever showing symptoms, and can infect others for years. The infamous 'Typhoid Mary' was a cook in New York between 1900

and 1915. She was also a typhoid carrier who infected every family she worked for until she was permanently quarantined in a sanatorium by New York State health officials. Typhoid Mary became a public health phenomenon and her case sparked a national debate over the reach of Quarantine Statutes.

Typhoid makes an appearance within Fairfax Circuit Court's own archives. In May 1919, a State-mandated test of the water in the public well on the Court Green showed the presence of typhoid-causing bacteria due to animal or human feces in the water. The Virginia Board of Health recommended that the water be chlorinated, the well be permanently covered and a pump installed to allow the public to continue using the water. If these measures were taken, the State Board would continue to chlorinate the water in good faith for Fairfax residents. Although the State of Virginia was taking the threat of typhoid very seriously, individual municipalities were charged with providing solutions to safeguard their citizens.



June 22. 1773

Whereas the small Pox is now in the Neighbourhood of Alexandria; John Carlyle; William Ramsay & Robert Adam Esqrs. or any two of them are appointed to endeavour and to use such methods as they may think necessary to stop the progress of that Distemper, and in case it should spread they have power to grant Licences to any person or persons in Alexandria or in that Neighbourhood to inoculate agreeable to the act of Assembly in that case made & provided

[Entry from Fairfax Court Order Book, June 1773](#)

The most rampant disease of the 18th and 19th centuries was smallpox. Since 1980, the World Health Organization has considered the smallpox virus to be eradicated. The last naturally-occurring case of smallpox was in 1977, in Somalia.

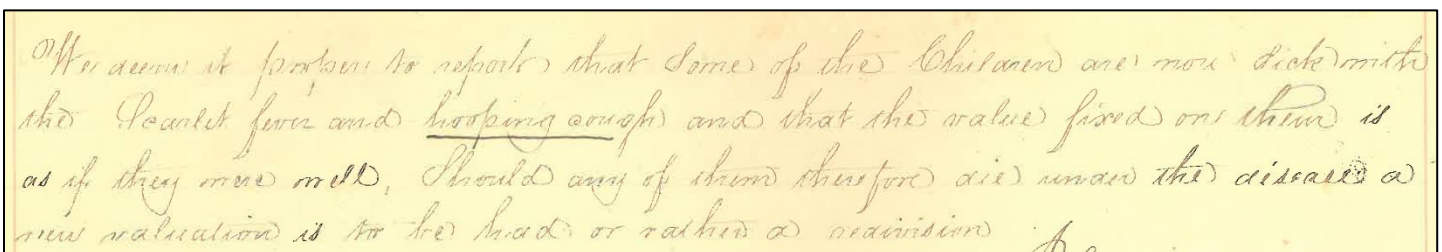
Smallpox caused flu-like symptoms and a blistering rash all over the body. As a result of the blisters, survivors were often left with massive scarring and many were also blinded. The virus was spread by the infected person coughing and sneezing, and also through contact with fluid from the blisters and dried scabs. Once recovered (or dead), the patient's clothes and bedlinen were washed or burnt to limit the spread of the disease. The smallpox virus has no cure.

Smallpox was present in Fairfax County during the Colonial period. It was particularly active in Alexandria, probably because of the regular influx of people from the port. Our court order books show that on June 22, 1773, Fairfax Circuit Court appointed several prominent Alexandrians, such as John Carlyle, William Ramsey and Robert Adams, to grant licenses to doctors to inoculate people against smallpox. At that time, smallpox inoculations consisted of taking pus from an infected person's blisters, making an incision in the upper arm of the

person to be inoculated and smearing the pus into the cut. As with modern vaccinations, this gave the person a small enough dose of the virus for the body to naturally fight it off and create lifelong immunity. When used to control the spread of an epidemic, it was very effective.

During the Civil War, Alexandria was again hit by smallpox. It was most virulent in the freed slave population as a result of crowded living conditions, poor nutrition and lack of healthcare access. In response to this epidemic, Alexandria's Military Governor opened the Claremont Smallpox Hospital just outside the city in Fairfax County. The hospital was located within Clermont House, which had been seized from French Forrest at the start of hostilities. The hospital was almost exclusively run by free black nurses, and began by mainly treating the recently freed black population. By the end of the war, the nurses treated everyone who needed it.

The last reference to smallpox in our records is of an outbreak in 1872. Dr. Ennis Jackson was ordered by the court to attend a family with smallpox, and he had to burn his entire suit of clothing, including boots, to contain the spread of the virus. Prior to attending the infected family, Dr. Jackson was assured by the court that he would be compensated for his work and expenses. He submitted his costs, but never received his full compensation, despite multiple appeals to the Court.



We deem it proper to report that some of the Children are now sick with the Scarlet fever and whooping cough and that the value fixed on them is as if they were well. Should any of them therefore die under the disease a new valuation is to be had or rather a division of

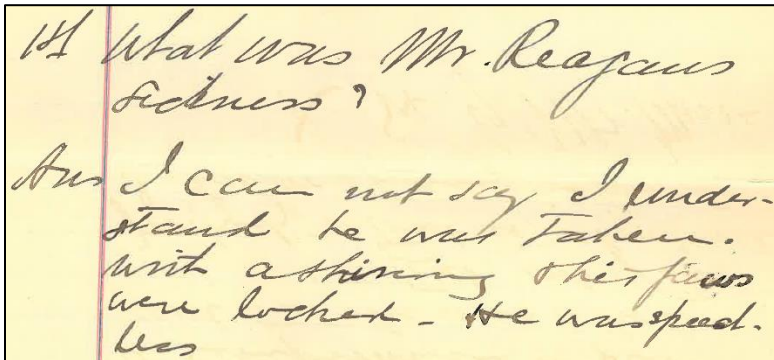
[Fairfax Deed Book K-3, p. 44](#)

Other infectious diseases mentioned in Fairfax Circuit Court's archival records are scarlet fever, whooping cough and tetanus. The record above relates to a court case from December 1844. Charles B. Smith and his siblings sued their former guardian for a division of slaves from their father's estate. The Court appointed commissioners to assess the slaves' values, and the commissioners reported "some of the Children are now sick with the Scarlet fever and whooping cough [sic]". The commissioners valued the slaves as though they were healthy, but added "Should any of them therefore die under the disease a new valuation is to be had."

Scarlet fever is a bacterial illness that develops from a streptococcal throat infection. It causes a high fever and a bright red rash. If left untreated, scarlet fever can cause kidney and lung

damage, and also lead to rheumatic fever which weakens the heart. Whooping cough is also a bacterial disease which can lead to pneumonia, but is usually only fatal for very young babies or adults with other chronic health problems.

These two diseases did claim lives in 19th century Fairfax County. One case from 1849 contains a letter sent from John Tynan to his sister, Ann. In the letter, he states that he has been very ill and weak and has a terrible cough. His doctor "ordered me to takeBalsom of wild cherry." John died shortly after the letter was written.



Q What was Mr. Regan's sickness?
A I can not say I understand he was taken with a shivering & his jaws were locked - He was speed. Was

Tetanus is a bacterial infection which produces a toxin that contracts the muscles, most often causing a locked jaw. Other symptoms include fever, seizures and sweating. Tetanus can be treated with an aggressive course of antibiotics. If untreated, sufferers can die from suffocation because of chest contraction.

Deposition from Regan vs. Regan, 1895

As the tetanus-causing bacteria live in soil, farmers are most at risk. Jeremiah Regan lived on a farm in filthy conditions with his cows and pigs living in his house. He died two weeks after coming down with an illness that gave him a high fever, "a shivering," and lockjaw: classic symptoms of tetanus. His death enabled his estranged wife to take control of her property, which she had been fighting for since 1875.

The diseases that appear in Fairfax Circuit Court's records were horrific for the victims and their families to endure. The disablement or death that resulted from the disease also had other major consequences for the sufferers' families. Our records serve as a glimpse into a pre-antibiotic Virginia; they give us some context for the lives (and deaths) of the disease sufferers and illustrate the impact of 18th and 19th century public health.

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

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http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/courts/circuit/historical_records.htm