

Measles and Malingerers: Illness, Disease, and other Afflictions in the Fort Victoria Journal 1846 – 1850

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Illness and death were inevitable issues for the residents of Fort Victoria between 1846 and 1950. Between common injuries the men sustained during their labours, measles and influenza epidemics, and women's health issues usually related to pregnancy, many of the members of the fort were ill or otherwise seriously unwell at some point during their tenure.

One of the most obvious and dramatic illness events during the years for which we have the Fort Victoria journals was the measles epidemic that raged across much of what is now British Columbia between 1847 and 1850. Measles is extremely contagious, and once it had started to spread, it swept across the region the same way that other diseases, most notably smallpox had before. Since in their early stages smallpox and measles are fairly similar, it is possible that some of the recorded instances of smallpox were in fact measles, since many of the descriptions of symptoms match both diseases¹. That historians are uncertain in some cases whether the disease described as decimating populations was in smallpox or measles is interesting since it shows measles as a very dangerous and potentially deadly, population changing disease.

Fort Victoria was affected by the measles epidemic along with the rest of the region.² The

1 Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, 10.

2 The best account of the regional impact of the disease comes from Robert Boyd, "The Pacific Northwest Measles Epidemic of 1847-1848." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 1, (Spring, 1994), pp. 6-47.

measles is first mentioned in the journal on February 5, 1848, with the notation that the disease has become very prevalent around Forts Vancouver and Nisqually³. By March 13, the disease reached Victoria, and begins to appear among the Songhees⁴. At this time, it was believed that the measles in Victoria was of “a mild type,” but by April 3 there had been many deaths among the Sinahomish people from both the measles and the dysentery that is apparently commonly contracted following the measles⁵. On April 8 the Songhees chief, Jeeathuc (also transcribed as Jealthuc – likely Chee-al-clach later called King Freezy) who was the first named victim of the measles is reported as having recovered from the measles but has contracted dysentery like many of the Sinahomish people. By April 7, the measles began to affect those within the fort: April 10 five of the fort’s men, Okaia, Jack, Ebony, Friday, and Captain Cole are all infected, Captain Cole being unfortunate enough to have simultaneously contracted dysentery⁶. The disease became deadly in Fort Victoria on April 18, with the deaths of Gagnon's wife and Keane's child. By April 24, two more of the HBC men, along with all 12 of the Sandwich Islanders (Hawaiians) have become ill⁷. Records of recovery do not start until early May 1848, and even as some of the residents of the fort recover, others continue to become ill. At the end of May, Finlayson briefly fears that smallpox has flared up in the Songhees population, but since there is only the one mention of this disease, it seems safe to assume that rather than smallpox, the symptoms Finlayson feared were

3 Fort Victoria Journal February 5, 1848; Boyd suggests the disease was brought to the fort on February 14 by four canoes of Makahs or on the 20th by Indians from Fort Langley. P. 38.

4 Fort Victoria Journal March 13, 1848.

5 Fort Victoria Journal March 16, 1848.

6 Fort Victoria Journal April 10, 1848.

7 Fort Victoria Journal April 24, 1848.

instead attributable to the very late onset of another case of the measles⁸. The measles are not mentioned in the journal after early June 1848, indicating that the disease did not flare up again in the subsequent two years. Only four people within the fort are reported as having died of the measles, but the death toll was much higher in the surrounding Native communities.

The second major disease that affected the fort in the time period of the journal was influenza. At one point suggested that it was brought by one specific man to the Fort Victoria region (“the Reverend Veyrit is still here & appears to be rather ineffectual in making the Sanges attent [sic] his lectures they appear to be impressed with the idea that he brought sickness amongst them the influenza [sic], with which some have died having unfortunately broke out amongst them on his arrival here”⁹). The disease first appears on June 26, 1848, while the community was still recovering from the measles outbreak. It worsens over the next several weeks: the first mention of the flu is of several women inside the fort becoming ill, and following this first report the disease spreads quickly¹⁰. The second report of flu happens the next day, with at least two men recorded as on the Sick List due to the influenza, which Finlayson calls “very verulent [sic]”¹¹. The disease spreads quickly to the Native population, which quickly begins to affect the fort's economy¹². On July 4, 1848, the level of devastation that the influenza is wrecking among the native population becomes clear: in his typical detached style, Finlayson reports that “all of the Indian lads whom we had working here died this evening with the influenza & some of

8 Fort Victoria Journal May 25, 1848.

9 Fort Victoria Journal July 14, 1848.

10 Fort Victoria Journal June 26, 1848.

11 Fort Victoria Journal June 27, 1848.

12 Fort Victoria Journal June 30, 1848.

our Sandwich Islanders are laid up with the same Complaint”¹³. After this, although there is some mention of other men being on the Sick List with the flu, the disease seems to lose some of its force until the winter of 1848. The flu is not seriously mentioned after early July until December, when it begins to appear again among the men inside the fort, sparking Finlayson's fear that it will again be as deadly as earlier in the year.¹⁴ Apparently his fears were unfounded, since at this time the only further mention of the flu is of three Natives who died, and the grief of their relatives living outside the fort¹⁵. The flu returns again on June 15, 1849, but although several people within the fort are laid ill with it, there is no mention of the disease after June 22, 1849. It is clear, therefore, that the serious outbreak of influenza that affected the majority of the region in 1848 and 1849 also affected Fort Victoria¹⁶ in the earliest stages of the disease, but following a very virulent first wave some degree of immunity must have been present within the population both inside the fort and among the Native people living in the surrounding areas.

The descriptions of those now ill with the measles and the flu represents one of the few times when women's health is addressed in the journal. The majority of the time, this is merely a passing mention, such as the emotionless declaration that “one of our men's wives has had the measles + is now convalescent”¹⁷. One of the most shocking records of women's health in the journal, however, is the recording of the passing of Gagnon's wife. In a rare display of emotion within the business-like tone of the journal, Finlayson describes her passing: “Gagnon's wife, who had been very ill for the last month departed this life this morning. . . .Gagnon's wife's principal

13 Fort Victoria Journal July 4, 1848.

14 Fort Victoria Journal December 20, 1848.

15 Fort Victoria Journal January 29, 1849.

16 Miller, Bruce Granville, “Speaking Notes: A Short Commentary on Land Claims in BC,” October 2003.

17 Fort Victoria Journal April 3, 1848.

complaint was an abortion that with the measles at the same time caused the poor woman's death"¹⁸ Whether the miscarriage was caused by the measles, or was a separate misfortune that weakened the woman before the onset of the measles is not recorded. The next woman to be mentioned in any detail within the journal is also mentioned in terms of her health, this time with "an inflammation of the lungs" rather than the measles¹⁹. In fact, there are extremely few mentions of women outside of perfunctory remarks about their illnesses, which as previously stated does make sense in that women's work was not the primary concern of the fort, but it does seem as though the women of the fort must have done something of note other than be shot at if they were native²⁰, get married²¹, or get sick.

Another fascinating aspect of illness at the fort was embodied in the "Sick List." This apparently recorded the men unable to work due to some illness or other. Early in the journal, Finlayson occasionally makes a formal note of who is on the sick list that day as such: "Sick List [Dibeau] & Friday & also M^cPhail"²². Since the illnesses or maladies that put them on the sick list are rarely listed, to some extent the record seems to be that of the malingerers. This impression is strengthened by the fact that many of the same men seem to spend a great deal of time recorded on the sick list: Friday and Satakarata being two fairly common examples. This is not to preclude the possibility that these two, and the others like them, were not actually ill with some unnamed chronic problem, but without further evidence such as an actual list recording their ailment, their frequent inability to labour due to their position on the sick list seems perhaps a bit suspicious.

18 Fort Victoria Journal April 18, 1848.

19 Fort Victoria Journal June 6, 1848.

20 Fort Victoria Journal August 4, 1847.

21 Fort Victoria Journal December 14, 1849.

22 Fort Victoria Journal June 24, 1846.

This conclusion is further supported by the fact that often when men not normally on the sick list appear, they are the ones with their maladies listed: “Kamthieu on the sick list with Swollen fingers” for example²³. Furthermore, considering that by February 8, 1847, Friday had been listed in the journal as on the sick list nine times, with no other man appearing more than three times without a reason, and given Finlayson's seemingly dry statement that “Bahia, Kimithieu Friday who were on the Sick list for some time back resumed duty this morning” it seems possible that Finlayson too thought these men were shirking duties rather than actually ill²⁴ [For more on accidents and the sick list see the interpretative essay “Daily Life at Fort Victoria, 1846 to 1850” by Anna Stooke].

Overall, death and disease were clearly not especially unusual among the residents of the fort and the surrounding areas. The measles epidemic spread quickly from the mainland among the residents of Fort Victoria and the Native people living nearby. It rapidly killed large numbers of natives just outside the fort, and also killed at least four of the residents of the fort. The influenza outbreak immediately following the measles was potentially even more deadly: in one day Finlayson reports that all the Native workers in the fort have died. The prevalence of disease in 1848 may have given the people of Fort Victoria some immunity against both the measles and influenza, given that the worst breakouts of both happened in the first half of 1848. The measles do not appear again after this, and although there are two minor breakouts of flu later in the journal they come nowhere near to the level of devastation of the first breakout. Illness is not, of course, only present in the form of large scale manifestations, and can be seen throughout the journal in the form of the Sick List. This list, although potentially at times one consisting at least

23 Fort Victoria Journal January 11, 1847.

24 Fort Victoria Journal February 8, 1847.

partially of malingerers, does record some of the more everyday manifestations of ill health at the fort: an injury incurred in the course of building something, or swollen hands making it difficult for a man to carry out manual labour. The women of the fort, too, are of course affected by illness, and indeed it is only when they are ill that they are really noted in the journal at all. The case of the women suggests that illness and disease are a revealing way to consider life in Fort Victoria between 1846 and 1850: revealing for the women in that their illness is the only way for them to be seen at all, and revealing for the men in that often many of the labourers are only named when they are on the sick list or are otherwise ill. Examining sickness at the fort places Fort Victoria in the larger history of the region by connecting it to other forts through shared experiences of disease. Furthermore, illness gives the journal a more personal aspect: through examining illness at the fort, it becomes possible to examine the people living at the fort, not just their daily labour output.

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