Hogs, Dogs, and Dirt
Public Health in Early Pittsburgh

The first half of the nineteenth century saw Pittsburgh emerge from a small frontier trading post to a thriving industrial city. In the process, the town’s wealth and population grew by leaps and bounds. This transition was no simple matter, however, for Pittsburghers, like their contemporaries elsewhere in the western world, were ill fitted to cope with the problems of emerging urbanization.

Public sanitation and health—they were virtually synonymous—were matters of major and continuing concern to a growing city. From the newspapers and other sources of Pittsburgh’s early history, it would appear that the chief health problems were hogs, dogs, and dirt. Despite periodic efforts to clean the town and prevent animals from roaming at will through streets and yards, Pittsburgh was still struggling with these issues when the Civil War broke out.

Disease, of course, was a corollary of these conditions, and its control was complicated by inadequate medical knowledge. Prior to the development of bacteriology in the 1870's and 1880's, the medical profession had no real understanding of the causative factors in disease. True, doctors could differentiate between diseases on the basis of symptoms and were able to predict the course of most of them. Moreover, by long experience they had evolved means for alleviating many forms of sickness, and had learned empirically some crude measures of disease prevention. But physicians lacked a rational basis for their medicine, and, as a result, were desperately trying to evolve a concept or concepts which would explain the nature of disease.

The two diseases which preoccupied public attention in the nineteenth century were Asiatic cholera and smallpox. Fortunately, cholera struck only on occasion, and smallpox, thanks to vaccination, never gained a serious foothold. In terms of morbidity and mortality, these two diseases were relatively insignificant, but the suddenness
of their onslaught, their high case fatality rate, and the horrible suffering they brought to their victims aroused general fear and consternation. The real causes of sickness and death, the omnipresent enteric and respiratory disorders, were all too well known and, by virtue of their familiarity, aroused no terror. Thus, summer diarrheas, "teething," "convulsions," and various other complaints which carried off about a third or more of the babies, were accepted as part of the divine order.

To a large extent, environment as a factor in disease and in general public health was imperfectly understood. Like its citizens of today, early Pittsburghers were proud of their town and extolled its fine location at the head of the Ohio River, its seemingly inexhaustible natural resources, and its prospering commerce and manufacturing. They boasted of its remarkably healthful location and were even willing to ascribe advantages to the ever-thickening pall of smoke which hung low over its buildings. Although geography first led to its settlement, it was coal that made Pittsburgh an industrial center, and it was this same coal that characterized it as the Smoky City—a characterization which, valid or not, endures even today. There were few travelers in the early days who did not comment upon the beauty of Pittsburgh's location, but before the population had reached 2,000 they also took note of its pall of smoke. As early as 1800, for example, John Bernard noted that a cloud of smoke hung over the town, recalling to him memories of London.¹

Nearly all subsequent writers first remarked on the smoke and then described the town. A visitor in 1816 wrote of Pittsburgh: "Dark dense smoke was rising from many parts, and a hovering cloud of this vapour, obscuring the prospect, rendered it singularly gloomy."² By the 1820's, even the editors of the city directories and newspapers were beginning to apologize for the omnipresent smoke. As the cloud thickened with the passing years, the newspapers, although continuing to expound the doctrine that smoke helped keep diseases at bay, by and large contented themselves with noting that the growing number of chimneys reflected a steady increase in

¹ John Bernard, Retrospection of America, 1797–1811, ed. by Mrs. Bayle Bernard (New York, 1887), 182.
² David Thomas, Travels Through the Western Country in the Summer of 1816. . . . (Auburn, N. Y., 1819), 50, 59.
wealth. Plaintive notes were sounded now and then, such as an item in the *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette* on February 21, 1851, to the effect that the citizens of Allegheny had had an excellent opportunity to view the aurora borealis, but that the "vapors of our own smoky city, prevented the inhabitants of Pittsburgh from getting a good view of it." In 1857, the same journal noted that on the previous Saturday it had been almost impossible to see across the street. "At half past four in the afternoon we had to light our gas, and one could hardly find his way through the streets after sundown," the editor reported, and then added: "It was such a day as a person who has never been in this city could scarcely believe possible."3

In 1826, Dr. William H. Denny wrote an account of health conditions in Pittsburgh which depicted the city as a veritable spa. In the course of his article, he asserted that bituminous smoke was "antimiasmatic" and had "sulphureous and antiseptic" qualities.4 This observation was immediately picked up by the local newspapers and writers and became a stock argument throughout much of the century. In 1857, the *Pittsburgh Quarterly Trade Circular* conceded that smoke "pervades the atmosphere to a large extent—but," the editor added, "this smoke, according to the report of the late Doctor Meyers, formerly physician to the Marine Hospital of this city, is, from the carbon, sulphur and iodine, contained in it, highly favorable to lung and cutaneous diseases."5

While the articulate inhabitants consoled themselves with the thought that the disagreeable features of the omnipresent smoke were more than compensated for by the growing industrial wealth it reflected and by its supposed beneficial effect upon general health, they were not willing to condone the presence of filth, dirt, and rubbish in the streets and gutters. Alas for good intentions, the efforts of the newspapers and a few leading citizens were only occasionally crowned with success, and for much of the time hogs and dogs proved the most effective scavengers, much to the dismay of the more fastidious townspeople. During these years there was no lack of municipal regulation, but enforcement was either sporadic or nonexistent.

3 *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, Feb. 21, 1851; Nov. 30, 1857.
4 S. Jones, *Pittsburgh in the Year Eighteen Hundred and Twenty-Six, Containing Sketches Topographical, Historical, and Statistical . . .* (Pittsburgh, 1826), 31–32.
As early as 1807, the borough of Pittsburgh passed an ordinance providing that "a fine not exceeding Twenty Dollars, and not less than Ten Dollars, be imposed on any person who shall cast or deposit any dead carcase, garbage, noxious liquor, or other offensive matter on any street, square, lane or alley, or on the beach of any of the rivers within the bounds of the Borough, or shall keep the same within any inclosure, to the annoyance of the neighbourhood..." Although growing rapidly, the town was still small enough that accumulated filth was no serious problem, and it was not until the threat of Asiatic cholera in the 1830's that any evidence of real concern is found. The great pandemic of Asiatic cholera, which spread from the Far East and inexorably marched across Russia, eastern and western Europe, and finally reached the shores of North America in 1832, was watched with fearful anticipation in the United States. Probably no epidemic in history gave so much advance warning, or aroused such grave fears. It was recognized that the disease exacted its heaviest toll in filthy, crowded slum areas, and every town and city in America awaiting its onslaught initiated campaigns to clean up the streets, drain stagnant pools, and remove all putrefying matter from private and public property.

Beginning in the fall of 1831, Pittsburgh newspapers began reprinting articles relating to the cause, cure, and prevention of Asiatic cholera. Many of these emphasized that "intemperance, disorderly living, and want of cleanliness" were prime predisposing conditions for the disease, and readers were exhorted to adhere "to a sober and temperate mode of living." In June, 1832, the Pittsburgh Gazette editorialized that the spreading alarm was probably beneficial, since "there is great necessity for the most energetic measures for purifying our city..." The paper assumed that the civic authorities would promptly establish a board of health and a cholera hospital and urged that action be taken quickly. The city had one major advantage, the editor declared, in "the coal smoke which obscures our atmosphere while it neutralizes all the miasma which comes within its influence." Thus, he added, the "same furnace or factory which contributes to the luxurious enjoyments of the capitalist, saves the industrious laborer from the ravages of the disease."

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6 Pittsburgh Gazette, June 2, 1807.
7 Ibid., Oct. 18 and Nov. 18, 1831; June 26, 1832.
Three days later, public notice was given that a ten-man Sanitary Board had been constituted with Mayor Samuel Pettigrew in charge. The board was given wide powers "to adopt and direct all such measures as they think necessary for averting the introduction of the frightful epidemic disease, which has approached the borders of our country." These steps included cleaning and purifying the town, providing for the sick poor, and appointing district inspectors whose duty it was to check for "all offensive, foul, or mouldy vaults, cellars, privies, or other nuisance [sic] of any Kind..." The board was also authorized to spend the sum of $10,000 for general sanitary purposes. Fortunately, although the cholera appeared sporadically for three years, 1832–1834, the attacks were light and Pittsburgh escaped the scenes of horror and devastation that marked most American cities. Nonetheless, under the threat of pestilence, the city continued to appropriate funds for public sanitation; in August, 1833, for example, the mayor was authorized to borrow $6,000 "for Sanitary and other purposes." On June 6, 1835, the editor of the Saturday Evening Visitor noted that cholera had appeared in the lower Mississippi Valley and urged the city officials not to relax because Pittsburgh had experienced only mild outbreaks in the past. He suggested that it might be well to clean the streets and remove all filth and offal as a preventive measure.

As the danger receded, the amount appropriated for such tasks dropped sharply. In the city budget for 1835, only $144 was spent for removing garbage, $261 for cleaning the markets, and an additional $9.75 for the expense "of taking hogs, etc." In succeeding years, the newspapers continued to needle the municipal officers about the state of the streets. The Morning Chronicle, in September, 1841, complained that the streets were full of muddy holes, and denounced the practice of dumping dirty water and garbage into the gutters. Garbage, augmented by dead bodies of cats, dogs, and pigs, the editor wrote, made the streets unbearable. In 1848, one of the newspapers ran a satirical story about a young Pittsburgh woman who was contemplating suicide by plunging into the canal basin near

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8 Ibid., June 29, 1832; Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, Aug. 8, 1833; Jan. 11, 1834.
9 Saturday Evening Visitor, June 6, 1835.
10 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, Jan. 5, 1836.
11 Morning Chronicle, Sept. 21, 1841.
Liberty and Grant streets. She jumped in once, climbed out, and decided to make a second attempt, "but, after leaning over the basin for a moment or two, beholding its filthy condition, and inhaling its feetid odor, she concluded to postpone drowning till she could meet with cleaner water." Shortly thereafter, the city passed an ordinance prohibiting the dumping of "earth, dirt, rubbish, filth, offal, garbage, or any offensive or unwholesome matter or liquid whatsoever, into or upon the Canal, or any of the basins within the limits of the city..."12 How effectively the ordinance was enforced can be judged by an editorial the following summer which described the water in the canal basin as "being black as ink, very noisome, and covered over in places with decaying animals and vegetable matter."13 From newspaper comments in succeeding years, it is obvious that merely passing an ordinance proved to be no solution to the sanitation problem. The Pittsburgh Daily Gazette noted in July, 1858, that the health of the city was excellent, but that the outbreak of an epidemic would not be unexpected. "There is hardly an alley," the editor wrote, "that does not reek with foul stenches; there is scarcely a sink hole that is not full of stagnant water." A year later, the newspaper declared: "It may not be out of place or time here and now to call public attention to the necessity of a speedy renovation and purgation of all back slums, pond holes, narrow alleys and general receptions of filth. Our city is in a very dirty condition at present, and should be scraped and rinsed out from one end to the other."14

Along with their campaigns against dirt and filth, the newspapers also inveighed against the omnipresent hogs roaming the city streets. It seems logical to assume that hogs would have been more of a problem in the days when Pittsburgh was essentially a village or small town; actually, the town's population had reached 40,000 before the newspapers broke into full cry against this evil. The issue was an old one, however; one of the first acts of the burgesses when Pittsburgh became a borough in 1794 was to pass an ordinance prohibiting hogs from running at large.15 In 1816, the ordinance was reinforced by

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12 Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, Apr. 28 and June 28, 1848.
13 Ibid., June 8, 1849.
14 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, July 20, 1858; July 9, 1859.
another which provided a fine of one dollar for anyone permitting horses, mules, oxen, or hogs to run at large in the city.\textsuperscript{16} Although the early newspapers were full of stories and editorials relating to the difficulties arising from stray dogs, virtually nothing was said of the hogs until the 1840's. The \textit{Morning Chronicle}, one of the first papers to raise objections, reported in October, 1841, that many pigs were still at large in the vicinity of the Point and that the residents were having trouble driving them from their gardens. In the following weeks, the editor continued to press city officials to take action. For example, in November, he reported that a pig had entered a house on Fourth Street and had subsequently escaped through one of the parlor windows. A month later, he addressed a notice to Joseph Barker, street commissioner, calling his attention to the fact that a dead pig lay in Diamond Alley between Wood and Market streets.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the \textit{Morning Chronicle} undoubtedly gained a temporary success in its campaign, the problem remained to plague the city for many years to come. In 1849, the city issued a proclamation directing officials to enforce the laws against hogs, but, judging from newspaper reaction, little was accomplished. When the high constable, a Mr. Richardson, was asked why he had failed to enforce the law, he explained that the city had not provided a pen for the hogs.\textsuperscript{18}

A new approach was tried in 1851, when a reward of a dollar an animal was offered to individuals catching pigs roaming loose in the city streets. According to the \textit{Daily Pittsburgh Gazette}, the police were kept busy in September of that year supervising the work of young boys who were happily engaged in earning the bounty on hogs. Unpenned hogs were only part of the trouble, however. One newspaper, in July, 1852, complained of the fumes arising from a pig pen located near the editorial offices. The editor did not question the right of the owner to maintain a pig pen in the heart of town, but he did suggest that the pigs be washed daily.\textsuperscript{19}

Almost every summer, drives were made to impound loose hogs, but the roundup of 1859 seems to have been the most effective one. The \textit{Daily Pittsburgh Gazette} ran an outraged editorial in August of


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Morning Chronicle}, Oct. 2, Nov. 24, and Dec. 16, 1841.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Pittsburgh Daily Gazette}, Aug. 5, 1848; Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, 1849.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Daily Pittsburgh Gazette}, Sept. 17 and 22, 1851; July 20, 1852.
that year which began: "It may seem strange but nevertheless true that there is an ordinance inflicting a fine for letting hogs run at large." "It is true they pervade every street and alley and almost run you down at every corner," the editor went on, "but this is all clearly against the city ordinance." Yesterday, he continued, a stranger from Louisville had been "run down by a huge porker" and hurt badly. In consequence, the editor said, the civic authorities were moving to enforce the hog law. In the roundup that followed, a "great drove of hogs" was penned up one day, and another thirty-nine were captured the following morning. The editor observed rather bitterly that he assumed many of them were ownerless, that they had "wandered about the city so long, unmolested, that either their owners [were] dead or the hogs [had] changed color and grown old to such an extent that their owners have forgotten how they looked."

Possibly of even greater concern to responsible citizens were the numerous stray dogs that infested the streets. Rabid dogs were considerably more of a threat then, for the Pasteur treatment for hydrophobia, or rabies, was still in the future. The ghastly, lingering, and certain death which rabies brought to its victims made it one of the most feared disorders, and these fears were reflected in the innumerable newspaper stories which gave purported cures, or other suggestions as to how to deal with the disease in both man and animal. With the advent of summer, almost every city began a campaign to remove stray dogs. In New Orleans, for example, the city officials usually proclaimed that after a certain date, all dogs running loose in the streets would be shot. This practice was quite general and, as Pittsburgh grew in size, it, too, adopted similar measures.

As early as 1790, the Pittsburgh Gazette printed a remedy for the bite of a mad dog. The so-called cure, which consisted of a compound of cinnabar and musk taken with a glass of brandy, must have proved a frail reed for those bitten by a rabid dog. In the fall of 1802, an indignant reader complained to the Gazette about the large number of dogs roaming the streets, asserting that one man had been killed by them. No action was taken until the following year when the burgesses proclaimed that henceforth all dog owners would be required to pay a license fee of twenty-five cents. Although occasional rumbles of discontent were sounded, the licensing system seems to have

20 Ibid., Aug. 5 and 13, 1859.
21 Pittsburgh Gazette, Apr. 3, 1790; Sept. 17, 1802; Dec. 2, 1803.
worked fairly well until 1831 when a new ordinance was passed. Under this law, whenever a mad dog was reported, all citizens would be required to confine their dogs for at least sixty days. Twenty-four hours after the proclamation, the burgesses were authorized to hire one or more persons to kill all dogs found at large.\footnote{Ibid., Aug. 2, 1831.}

Five years later, the ordinance was modified slightly, with one amendment providing that dogs must be muzzled, and another increasing the bounty for killing stray dogs. In 1843, a second redrafting of the measure reduced the bounty to fifty cents, and provided that dogs "need not be kept muzzled... except from the 15th of July to the 15th of September." As with the hog laws, those against dogs proved difficult to enforce, and the Pittsburgh newspapers continued to report instances of people bitten by dogs and to complain of negligence on the part of the city authorities. For example, in June, 1848, a child was reported to have been attacked by a dog and to have suffered severe injuries. In August, a man was bitten, and the \textit{Pittsburgh Daily Gazette} editorialized: "Hundreds of worthless brutes are constantly running at large, and those whose occupations compel them to be abroad late at night, are annoyed at every corner."\footnote{\textit{Pittsburgh Daily Gazette}, Aug. 8, 1843; June 6 and Aug. 28, 1848.}

Throughout the remaining prewar years, the treatment of hydrophobia and the problem of stray dogs continued to preoccupy the newspapers. In 1858, the \textit{Gazette} again denounced the fact that dogs were "becoming too much of a nuisance about the City," and expressed the hope that measures would be taken to "protect the people from their fangs." Almost every summer, usually in June or July, the mayor would proclaim that all stray dogs would be impounded or killed, but the problem remained to be solved by future generations.\footnote{\textit{Daily Pittsburgh Gazette}, July 14, 1858; June 5, 1860.}

The spirit of free enterprise was exceedingly strong in frontier America in the early nineteenth century, and local and state officials were quite reluctant to infringe upon individual liberties. Hence, it was not until conditions literally demanded government action that a few tentative steps to promote public health were taken. As early as 1800, however, the borough of Pittsburgh had made regulations with respect to the public market. In that year, an ordinance was
promulgated stating that no one was permitted to "slaughter or kill any beast within the limits of the said Market, or lay any garbage, dung or offal therein. . . ." Moreover, individuals were not to be permitted to sell "provisions, vegetables, nuts, or fruit, at second hand. . . ." In 1806, another regulation provided that the clerk of the market should inspect the quality and quantity of all "Lake Salt . . . exposed to sale in the Borough." A few years later, this ordinance was made more specific and a city salt inspector was appointed.\textsuperscript{25}

The next significant step was the creation of a public sanitary committee in 1832. Prior to this, the street commissioner had been responsible for general sanitary measures. As indicated earlier, the threat of Asiatic cholera awakened the townspeople to the deplorable state of much of their public and private property. As a result, in June, 1832, an official Sanitary Board was established, consisting of the mayor, two representatives from the Select Council, three from the Common Council, and three aldermen. Provided with extensive powers and a substantial amount of money, the board seems to have functioned quite well for several years. When the board was first appointed, it was assisted by a group of physicians, but by 1834, if not sooner, the board had appointed a city "health physician." In that year, Dr. J. R. M'Clintock, in his capacity as health physician, issued a series of reports giving the number of cholera cases.\textsuperscript{26}

As the tide of Asiatic cholera receded, the Sanitary Board appears to have played little role in the city’s life except for the periodic visitations of smallpox. The incidence of smallpox, which had been greatly reduced by vaccination, began to rise in 1830’s as a generation emerged which had not known the horrors of this dreadful disease. To meet the threat, the "Sanitary Committee" appointed Dr. George D. Bruce as the city’s official vaccinating officer in May, 1836.\textsuperscript{27}

The exact title of the health board is not too clear, for after 1832 the newspapers refer to the Sanitary Committee, the Sanitary Board, or the Board of Health more or less interchangeably. It is reasonably certain that what actually existed was a sanitary committee consist-

\textsuperscript{25} Pittsburgh Gazette, Apr. 5, 1800; Sept. 2, 1806; Pittsburgh Gazette, And Manufacturing & Mercantile Advertiser, Jan. 7, 1825.

\textsuperscript{26} Pittsburgh Gazette, June 29 and Aug. 14, 1832; Aug. 6, 19, and 20, 1834.

\textsuperscript{27} Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, May 6, 1836.
ing of a group of elected municipal officers. The first real city Board of Health was appointed either in 1851 or 1852, and this body, too, came in response to the threat posed by a wave of Asiatic cholera. As early as 1848, a resolution was presented to the Select Council suggesting that the Sanitary Committee consider establishing a Board of Health "... to guard against the spread of the Asiatic Cholera, should it make its appearance amongst us."28 No action was taken on the proposal, but it appears that the Sanitary Committee was prompted to take strong measures to clean up the city and to make arrangements for the care of destitute cholera patients.

The first newspaper reference to what may have been the new Board of Health was a notice on July 11, 1851, that the board had "met last night, but there being no sickness in Pittsburgh, adjourned without doing anything." Certainly by the following year, an official board had come into existence, since a bill of mortality for the week ending August 7, which showed that twenty deaths had occurred in the city, was published over the signature of "James H. Willson, Physician to the Board of Health." In February, 1853, the Gazette published the names of the newly appointed members of the Board of Health, a group consisting of Dr. J. J. Myers, president, Allen Cordell, treasurer, M. L. Lewis, secretary, George Fortune, health officer, and Dr. C. F. Williams, physician.29 The disappearance of cholera for a year or two apparently led the city to reduce the appropriation for the health board, but it was only a respite. Cholera broke out again in 1854, and on September 19, the Gazette reported that in the two previous days one hundred and twenty deaths had occurred in the city; succeeding issues recorded many more deaths. In its editorial columns on September 19, the Gazette noted that there had been many complaints against the board, but explained that the board "is one of limited powers and until yesterday, was devoid of means." The situation had now been remedied, the paper stated, for the board "has now been put in funds, and has proceeded to appoint Sanitary Committees in each of the wards, who will be charged with the distribution of the fund appropriated by Councils in such a manner as effectually to purify the city."30

28 Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, Nov. 18, 1848.
29 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, July 11, 1851; Aug. 11, 1852; Feb. 17, 1853.
30 Ibid., Sept. 19, 1854.
The impetus from the cholera epidemic of 1854 evidently carried over for several years. In 1856, the Gazette commended “Mr. George Fortune, the very efficient Health officer and the Board, for their unceasing exertions to secure a full compliance with the laws of health.” The Board of Health, however, still had as its basic function the control of the major epidemic diseases, and as long as there were no unusual diseases, not much was expected from it. With the subsidence of Asiatic cholera, little is heard of the board’s activities after 1856. A brief notice in 1858 from Dr. A. C. Murdoch, the Board of Health physician, stated that his office would be open at special hours for “the poor of the city who may desire vaccination. . . .”

The health physician continued to publish brief reports on city deaths, but the major work of the Board of Health, at least until the outbreak of the Civil War, was concerned with overseeing the sanitary condition of the streets and of the city in general. Judging by newspaper reaction, its success in this area varied from year to year. That its duties were not too onerous is indicated by the fact that in 1860 the city allocated only $500 for all expenses connected with the Board of Health. While public health officials were expected to function primarily in times of medical crises, the creation of a permanent health organization paved the way for effective action in later years. Scientific research was rapidly transforming both concepts and procedures in medicine and public health, and Pittsburgh, consciously or not, was preparing to take advantage of these advances.

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31 Ibid., Aug. 1, 1856; Jan. 25, 1858.
32 Ibid., Apr. 4, 1861.