



The
Tip
of the
Mitt
Journal



The Tip of the Mitt **Pest Houses**

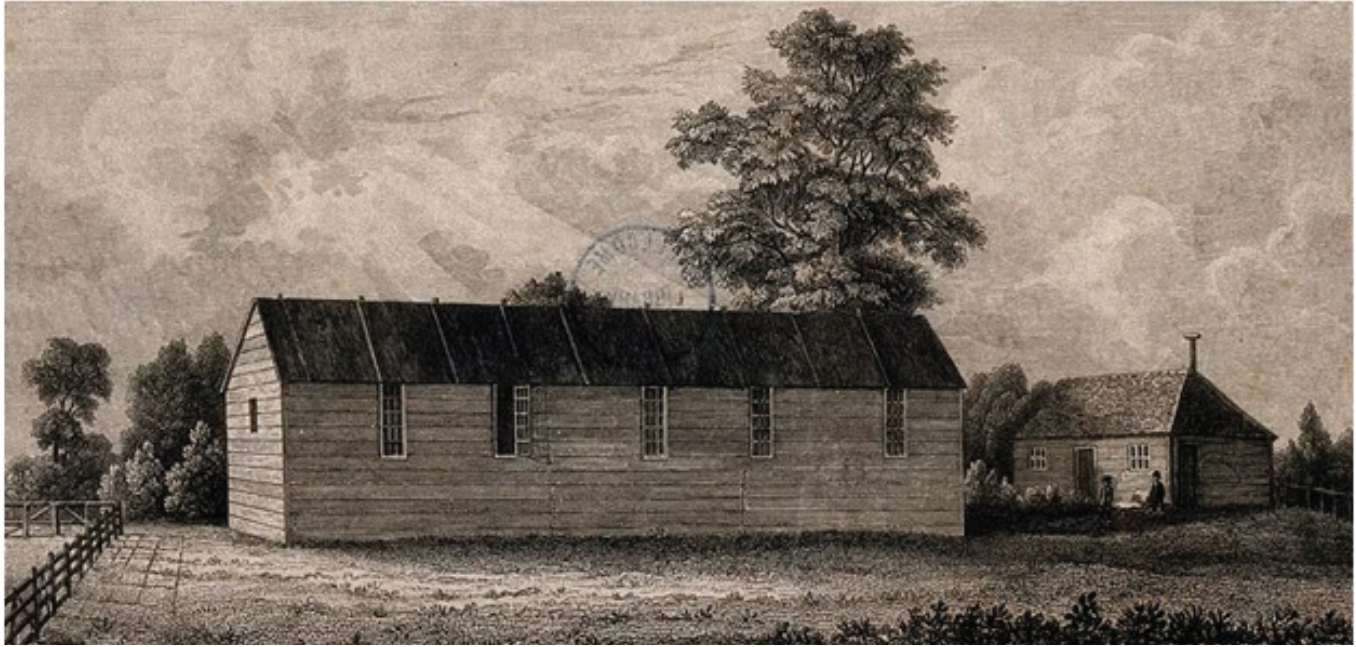
by **Richard A. Wiles**

Brought to you by



Newspapers, community photos, genealogical research at www.gwood.us

2 - Pest Houses



An early New England community “pest house,” photo from the National Archives

The Tip of the Mitt’s Pest Houses

By Richard A. Wiles

They were referred to as a “quarantine facility,” a “fever shed,” the “bug house,” or the “plague house.” The most common term used was the “pest (pestilence) house.” By the year 1910, almost every community in Michigan had a designated building to use as a place to socially distance those found to have a communicable disease. The most common disease was smallpox, followed by tuberculosis, diphtheria, measles and scarlet fever. The State of Michigan first mandated the creation of a community pest house in 1857 when

the state legislature passed a public health act requiring all communities to set up a public board of health. It would consist of three to seven persons, along with a competent physician to act as the health officer. The Title X Public Health Act Section 2 stated: “The said Board of Health shall have power, and it shall be their duty, to take such measures as they deem effectual to prevent the entrance of any pestilential or infectious disease into the community ... they can establish, maintain and regulate a pest house or hospital, at some place within the community or not exceeding three miles beyond its boundary ... any resident of the community infected with any such disease can be removed to such pest-house or hospital if the public health physician and two other physicians of the community certify that removal of such resident is necessary for the preservation of public health ... ”

In 2022, the idea of social distancing, quarantining, and the community spread of COVID is very much in the forefront of our lives. Early on in Europe it was understood that those who avoided the sick would then escape disease. Though quarantines existed in Biblical times, the first recorded legal quarantine restriction took place in Italy during 1374 to help control the Bubonic Plague (also known as the Black Death). It was caused by fleas on rodents infecting humans and it killed millions in Europe during the Middle Ages. According to the book *Dr. Graeme, Pest Houses & Quarantine in Colonial Philadelphia*, (2020):

“The Italian law required that every plague patient be taken out of the city into the fields, there to die or recover. Venice, in response to the black death, required ships to anchor for 40 days before coming ashore. The

Italian word for forty was ‘quaranta’ – thus the term quarantine.”

In the early years of the plague, Venice took the lead in establishing these “quaranta” quarantine stations for maritime travelers. The stations were ships permanently at anchor on nearby, isolated islands, or the use of segregated buildings. The stations became known as “lazarettos,” after the Biblical Lazarus who rose from the dead just as those who emerge from the stations alive.

In 1423, the Senate of the Republic of Venice decided to create (for the first time anywhere) an “ospitale” to isolate those infected with the plague. When officials decided they could not cure those with the disease, their next step would be to isolate them from the healthy. Venice was the first community to adopt an “epidemiological” approach — that was the Lazzaretti Island Hospital. The concept and methods used on the island later proved important to controlling contagious diseases.

Colonial Philadelphia was the first North American community to enact a quarantine law. It did so in 1700, one year after a yellow fever outbreak killed over 200 of its citizens. The law regulated ships coming into the harbor, requiring them to stay one mile away until the captain could obtain a bill of health license indicating no sickness or disease was on board. By 1743, the city had its own version of the Venice Lazzaretti Island “pest house” or hospital. The 340-acre Fisher’s Island in the Delaware River had a quarantine hospital erected on it. The building was used by sick



Lazzaretto Vecchi Island in the central part of the Venice Lagoon, 1425, photo from lazzarettiveneziani.it



Mackinaw City “pest house,” photo from Mackinaw City Historical Society

people arriving at the port of Philadelphia and was known as the Pest House or the Old Lazaretto.

The first pest house or hospital in Michigan was located in Detroit beginning in 1861. Larger communities in Michigan soon followed in establishing their own pest houses. The first one in the Tip of the Mitt

region was in Mackinaw City. It was established sometime in the mid- to late-1890s. All the tourists coming to the area on trains and boats brought various diseases with them. The most common communicable disease brought to the area was smallpox. Victims experienced flu-like symptoms, fever and vomiting. They also experienced a rash that appeared first

4 - Pest Houses

on the face, hands and forearms, and then later the trunk. No treatment or cure existed for smallpox. On average, three out of every 10 people who contracted the disease died. A vaccine for smallpox was invented in 1798 by Edward Jenner in England.

The Mackinaw City “Pest House” was a simple, clapboard structure discovered in 2004 (as a long-deserted machine shop) and was restored by the Mackinaw Area Historical Society in 2005 and is now part of the society’s Heritage Village Museum. According to the society:

“A typical Pest House would have had many beds and often more makeshift beds on the floor. Beds may have been separated with temporary curtains. Men, women and children would all be taken care of in the same building. The single caretaker would have been someone who liked to care for people and was immune to smallpox either having survived it or having had cow pox. Doctors, when available, would check on patients and order medicine. The caretaker would keep patients warm, fed, and comfortable sometimes with help from community members who would leave cut wood and food on the rock outside the door to help out ... there was no running water in the Pest House. Caregivers had to haul water into the Pest House from an outside well, even in the winter. Then the water would need to be heated with a wood stove requiring wood and constant attention to keep it going to keep the building warm and keep water warm to care for the patients.”



Smallpox victim, photo from the National Archives

The inhabitants of the pest house were normally required to stay for a 30-day period. Only one person was allowed in and out of the house to bring food, water, wood for the heater, and attend the sick and healing. That person was carefully monitored when outside the house. Little could be done at the time for those afflicted with smallpox, diphtheria, or scarlet fever. While smallpox was a viral infection, diphtheria was a bacterial infection. Symptoms often would come on gradually, beginning with a sore throat and a fever. In severe cases, a grey or white patch would develop in the throat —this could block the airway and create a barking cough. Scarlet fever was also a bacterial infection with symptoms that included a sore throat, fever, headache, swollen lymph glands, and a rash. The rash was red and felt like sandpaper. It was a disease most commonly affecting children between five and 15 years of age; however, adults also contracted it.

In December of 1901, the *Petoskey Record* reported that a new pest house was to be erected east of the city of Petoskey. That did not happen due to protests by those who would be a neighbor of the structure. Instead, the March 12, 1902, *Petoskey Record* reported the city of Petoskey had sold that two-acre parcel to a city resident and had the partially built pest house structure taken down in order that it be erected on a new site. A new pest house, to be jointly owned by the City of Petoskey, Bear Creek Township and Resort Township, was then proposed by city officials. That did not take place. Rather, the city bought 15 acres of property south of the city boundary on Clarion (River) Road to use not only for the building of a pest house, but also for the dumping of the city’s generated waste. The June 27, 1903, *Petoskey Evening News* described the building as “... an edifice of passable wood workmanship located two miles south of the city on an elevation command-



Mackinaw City "Pest House," photo from Mackinaw City Historical Society



Author's simulation of the 1903 Petoskey pest house located south of the city on Clarion (River) Road

ing a view of the road, and the rail-road tracks beyond ... the residence possesses all the ordinary facility for a properly moderate living apartment. The exterior of the building is pine shingled, while the interior is finished

in wallpaper with footboards. The house has several roomy apartments, all of which have received several thorough disinfections ..."

The property sold to the city for



Mocher formaldehyde gas disinfecting generator, photo from AmericanArtifacts.com

its pest house and town dump was owned by Joseph Omlor. He farmed the land, as well as nearby parcels. It contained several outbuildings and sheds. A gully road led to the back of the property which became the town dump until it closed in the 1970s.

The Independent Democrat on December 6, 1901, reported that Petoskey's undertaker, Nathan Stone, had acquired a formaldehyde generator to be used in disinfecting rooms and/or houses such as the Petoskey pest house (beginning in 1903).

6 - Pest Houses

The directions for the Wocheer gas generator stated, "Close all windows and doors ... The gas is heavy and first ascends to the ceiling and then slowly descends down in a dense cloud. The linen, quilts, blankets, etc. should be stretched out on a line to get as much surface to the disinfectant as possible." The apparatus' tank was filled with formaldehyde and heated by a kerosene burner. Other disinfectants of that time were using vinegar or carbolic acid (phenol) to wash walls. Ammonia, hydrogen peroxide and borax were also used for disinfecting any contaminated spaces.

The Petoskey pest house was out of use by 1917, just before the city — and nation — was to be hit by the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-1920. By 1917, the structure had been vandalized several times. In a 1971 interview by Boyne City High School student Elsworth Marsh, Walter Bannister said he took up residence in the building after a fire burned down his farm home. The city allowed him to temporarily live in it and he eventually was the one to tear it down. Marsh's 1971 article about the Petoskey pest house stated the structure was known by the citizens as the "House of the Dead." Most people were afraid to go to it; however, if one could not afford to go to the hospital for help, they were sent to this house.

Besides Mackinaw City, Petoskey and Cheboygan, East Jordan and Boyne City had a pest house. Also, Pellston, Levering, and McKinley-Maple River Townships in Emmet County set aside a building for those with com-




Alpena Detention Hospital, photos from Alpena County Fletcher Public Library

municable diseases. In Charlevoix, according to the Charlevoix Historical Society, "The 1901 Sanborn Fire Insurance map shows a 'Bug Killing House' on Ferry Avenue next to the Ferry Seed Company ... It was used for people who had serious contagious diseases. Other people in the neighborhood were warned to stay away." The Alpena pest hospital was a converted 1880 farmhouse and later, the house of Dr. Dunlop who referred to it as "Raven's Craig." Its official name was the City Detention Hospital.

Pest houses were real and ugly. Some of them still stand today, especially in the New England area. Michigan's only remaining (preserved) pest house is the one in Mackinaw City. All others were burned to the ground to eradicate any disease that may have remained inside them. They were considered necessary at the time; however, their use is somewhat an inhumane practice by today's standards. Pest houses disappeared as community hospitals

became more prevalent, offering adequate facilities to take care of those who had communicable diseases. At the same time, most common communicable diseases were lessened and/or have been wiped out with vaccinations.

In 1902, a smallpox epidemic broke out in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. To combat it, the city board of health issued a mandate that all city residents had to be vaccinated to help stop the disease. One city resident refused to be vaccinated on the grounds that it denied him the right to care for his own body how he knew best to do. The city filed criminal charges against him. In court this anti-vaxxer lost his case. The case was then taken up by the United States Supreme Court. In *Jacobson vs. Massachusetts*, the nation's highest court ruled that a state had the right to enact compulsory vaccination laws as the best way to protect the public health. That ruling still stands today. 🌿



The Anti-Vaccination Society of America
 OTHERWISE
 An Association of "half-mad", "misguided" people,
 who write, and toil, and dream, of a time to come, when it
 shall be lawful to retain intact, the pure body Mother
 Nature gave, sends GREETING to a "suspect". "Liberty
 cannot be given, it must be taken."
 You are Invited to Join Us

Frank D Blue, Sec'y,
 Terre Haute, Ind. **1902** Hon L H Piehn,
 President

✉ Enclose 25c for certificate of membership.

Wikipedia.com

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

- SOURCES:
 Greenwood Cemetery Local History
 Project-gwood.us
 Ancestry.com
 Wikipedia
 National Archives
 Newspapers.com

- Free Vaccination -

The residents of Cheboygan County are urged by the BOARD OF SUPERVISORS, acting in conjunction with the State Board of Health, to be vaccinated against

SMALL POX

which has gripped some of the larger cities in the state and which, in the belief of the state board of health, will spread north as quickly as the cold weather arrives.

Small Pox Thrives in Cold Weather

and to guard against the loss of life and the spread of this dreaded disease in this vicinity, the public is urged to be vaccinated at the county's expense. Residence of the townships of Benton, Beaugrand, and Inverness, and the city of Cheboygan are asked to visit the city physician for vaccination. In the other townships arrangements will be made and announced later by the supervisors.

Go to any doctor in the city of Cheboygan or those named in the townships for vaccination. There will be no expense, and it may save your life and the life of many others.

CHEBOYGAN COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
 C. C. McGUIRE, Clerk

Report of the Pest House of the City of Petoskey, Mich. By Elsworth M. Marsh, 1971

The following report was written by a student of government in 1971 and is reprinted with little editing:

The Story

In the early birth of Petoskey, about 1900, it was known as the city of death. Other than being snow bound in from other cities, it was exposed to disease, which forced the city to quarantine the city and build a Pest House.

In 1902, the City of Petoskey purchased land out on River Road from Mr. Joseph Omler. Sometime in 1903, the City of Petoskey built a Pest House for small pot, T.B., and other exposable disease. This house was for people who couldn't afford to go to the hospital.

Because of the name it got, people were afraid to go there. It was a place where respectable people wouldn't be found dead in it. On the other hand, it was a quarantine place and if you had a contagious disease, you must go there. It was called, "The House of the Dead."

Report preface

In 1971, this report was written by Elsworth M. Marsh, a student of government. In a government class, which Mr. Marsh attended, the subject was the Pest House. Mr. Marsh was interested in it and investigated it.

In Mr. Marsh's investigation of the City Hospital, people of the city

couldn't or did not want to remember the hospital. In his investigation, he found two men who were willing to talk about the hospital. It was Mr. Bacon, who was "hundred-one," and Mr. W. Bannister, who lived in the house after it was a Pest House.

In the early 1900s, there was a lot of unexperimented disease, which was a great hazard to the city, so they built a Pest House. The City Ordinance (Charter) gave the city the right to purchase land for such hospital. The Pest House served the city, in a way the clinic does now.

City Ordinance

The City Ordinance is sit up to protect the city. The Charter of the City of Petoskey, on February 14, 1916, Chapter Twenty, Section 6, on Public Health stated: The City Council may purchase land and erect thereon or otherwise provide one or more hospital, pest house, or quarantine building either within or without the city limits, and provide for appointment of the necessary officers, attendant or employees for the care and management thereof and for the care and treatment therein, of such sick and diseased person as the Council or The Board of Health of the city shall deem proper; and by direction of the Council or the Board of Health; person having malignant, infection, or contagious disease, or who may have been exposed to such disease, may be removed to such hos-

pital, pest house, quarantine building and detained and treated, when safety so requires; and the Council may provide such restraints and punishment as may be necessary to prevent any such hospital, pest house, or quarantine building.

Interview

In Mr. Marsh's investigation, the two men, who had interest in talking about the Pest House, were Mr. Joseph Bacon and Mr. Walter Bannister. Mr. Bacon told me how it was back then, and Mr. Bannister was a man who lived in the house.

Mr. Joseph Bacon: I'm hundred-one you know, lived in the main part of town, at the time.

Mr. Marsh: Can you tell me much about the Pest House.

Mr. Bacon: Yes! It was cold, people didn't like going there. I had some neighbor that came down with small pot, they didn't want to go. I reported them to the health Officer (Dr. John Peddin).

Mr. Marsh: You helped out, when you could?

Mr. Bacon: Yes!

Mr. Marsh: I heard that the Pest House was a place to dump the dead. I heared that when they feed them they sit the food just inside of the fence, if they got up to get it, they would eat

The neighbors are making quite a hub-bub over the recent location of the pest house, and are circulating a petition for its removal.

May 30, 1883 Petoskey City Record, gwood.us

Mr. Bacon: No! There were Nurse, all the time and doctor would come, to see their patient.

Mr. Marsh: Do you know when it started or ended

Mr. Bacon: Yes! It was started when my son was born, he is sixth-five.

Mr. Marsh: About 1903, then?

Mr. Bacon: Yes!, do you want to hear a story, I was standing in a store and in come Indian. The Storekeeper said, just a minute I'll be right with you. I told the storekeeper to serve him first. When the Indian left, I told the storekeeper, why I want him to go first. He was broken out with small pot.

Mr. Marsh: Why would a City do such a thing? It's up to the city to build such house.

Mr. Bacon: There was about forty case of small pot alone in a day.

(Mr. Bacon took Mr. Marsh to his room, to talk old times, but Mr. Marsh had to go. But he couldn't brush Mr. Bacon off.)

Mr. Marsh: Hello! Mr. Walter Bannister?

Mr. Bannister: Yes!

Mr. Marsh: I'm Mr. Marsh, may I come in?

Mr. Bannister: Yes!

Mr. Marsh: I heard you lived in the Pest House.

Mr. Bannister: Yes!, and I tore it down.

Mr. Marsh: Do you know when it started and when you tore it down.

Mr. Bannister: No!, see I had a fire out on the farm and the city gave me the house to live in.

Mr. Marsh: Okay, when you moved back out on the farm you tore it down. Do you know when?

Mr. Bannister: Yes, no I don't know when I tore it down. See when I went to tear it down, Mrs. Starr want to live in it again. She went to the city to ask not to tear it down. The City gave me the go ahead.

Mr. Marsh: How much rent did the city charge you to live there?

Mr. Bannister: Nothing!

Mr. Marsh: Well!, I got to be going and thank you very much for your help.

Mr. Bannister: Well! Come again. No! There was somebody who lived there, George Washington.

Mr. Marsh: The George Washington lived there?

Mr. Bannister: No, a man who live there and work at the dump, he was a wineo. He was killed there.