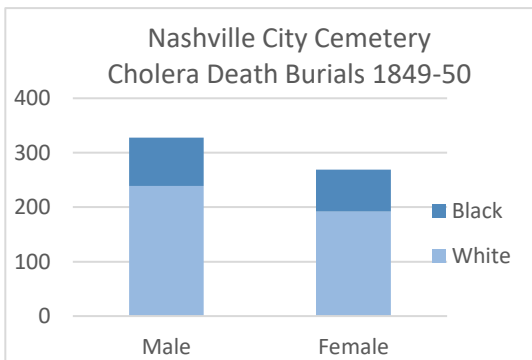


“Sometimes Your Whole Family Dies of Cholera”

The Impact of the Cholera Pandemic on Nashville

Although the headline is a line from the rock musical *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, and not a newspaper headline from the day, it speaks to the devastating impact cholera had on both Nashville and the world. The 19th century saw numerous cholera pandemics, which spread from Asia through Europe and eventually made its way to the Americas, arriving in Nashville, most notably in 1834, 1849, 1873, and 1892. We now know that cholera is spread through drinking water contaminated with the cholera bacteria, usually caused by human waste, and typically only 20% of people who contract the bacteria develop severe symptoms. Symptoms can include diarrhea, vomiting, leg cramps, and fever.

Many victims from the 1849 and 1873 cholera epidemics were buried in the Nashville City Cemetery. In 1849, the population of Nashville was approximately 11,000 people. Nashville City Cemetery estimates that 9% of the population died between 1849 and 1850 from this outbreak. The chart below illustrates some demographic details of those whose burial record indicates cholera as the cause of death.



Because 19th century medical practices and records were not what they are today, other listed causes of death like diarrhea and fever from this time period may also have been due to cholera, but are not represented in these statistics.

Although the musical *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, stretches the facts in the case of Jackson (he was orphaned at 14 years old, but only his mother died of cholera in an outbreak in the late 18th century), some people in Nashville did lose their whole family. One such family was that of the Steward at the Tennessee School for the Blind. The account of this family was noted in the school's Biennial Report, which includes Board of Trustee Minutes from 1849:

“During the month of June following, the Superintendent, Mr. Berry, the Steward and his wife, and three or four of the children, died of the cholera. The rest of the children were scattered and the school suspended. At a meeting in July Mr. Wheelan was employed as Principal to fill the vacancy occasioned by the death of Mr. Berry.”

The superintendent, Mr. J.G. Berry was buried at the Nashville City Cemetery in June of 1849, but the location of burial of the Steward and his family is unknown.

Cholera also claimed the life of a U.S. President, no it wasn't President Jackson (he passed away in 1844 in Nashville, a few years before this outbreak), it was President James K. Polk. President Polk purchased his retirement home in Nashville near the end of his presidential term, but he would only be able to enjoy it for a few short months. He contracted cholera in Nashville and died on June 15, 1849, just 103 days after the end of his term. President Polk was originally buried in the Nashville City Cemetery, before being moved to Polk Place, and then to his final resting place at the Tennessee State Capital.

According to the Metro Government of Nashville & Davidson County,

“Until the early 20th century, Nashville's Waterworks did not chemically treat drinking water. Around 1878, in response to several cholera outbreaks, the Health Department, Medical Profession, and Waterworks urged the city to install an island filtering gallery to reduce the amount of waterborne bacteria in the drinking water. Pumps suctioned river water through a gravel and sand filter built into a river island next to the pumping station to physically remove mud and other contaminants.”

Interested in learning more about the cholera pandemic and city infrastructure today? Listen to the [In Deep podcast](#) by American Public Media's The Water Main. They even dive into how scientist today are sampling sewage to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

Visit the Nashville City Cemetery today to explore more of Nashville's rich history!