

19TH Century Timeline of Epidemics in the U.S.

Date	Location	Epidemic / Endemic Disease
1793-98	Philadelphia	Yellow Fever
1803	New York	Yellow Fever
1820-23	U.S. (nationwide)	"Fever"
1832	New York and other major eastern cities	Cholera
1833	Columbus, Ohio	Cholera
1834	New York City	Cholera
1837	Philadelphia	Typhus
1837	Great Plains states	Smallpox
1841	Southern states	Yellow Fever
1847	New Orleans	Yellow Fever
1847-8	Worldwide	Influenza
1849	New York, New Orleans, St. Louis, Memphis (cities along the Mississippi River)	Cholera
1850-1	U.S. (nationwide)	Influenza
1850-55	Southern port cities; recurring epidemics in New Orleans	Yellow Fever
1851	Coles Co., Illinois; the Great Plains states	Cholera
1862	Pacific Northwest states	Smallpox
1863-83	New Orleans	Recurring epidemics of Smallpox
1865-1873	Philadelphia, New York, Boston, New Orleans	Smallpox
1865-1873	Baltimore, Memphis, Washington DC	Cholera
1865-1873	Philadelphia, New York, Boston, New Orleans, Baltimore, Memphis, Washington DC	Recurring epidemics of Typhus, Scarlet Fever, Yellow Fever
1873-5	North America and Europe	Influenza
1867 & 1878	New Orleans (included lower Mississippi River valley in 1878)	Yellow Fever
1885	Plymouth, Pennsylvania	Typhoid
1886	Jacksonville, Florida	Yellow Fever

Sources: Gerald N. Grob, *The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America*(2002). Maureen A. Taylor, *Major US Epidemics* (2009).

Glossary of Select 19th Century Diseases (from <http://www.antiquusmorbus.com>):

Apoplexy: Any sudden death that begins with sudden loss of consciousness; incapacity from cerebral hemorrhage or stroke.

Bilious fever: When a continual, remitting, or intermitting fever is accompanied with a frequent or copious evacuation of bile, either by vomit or stool. [Buchan 1785]

Cholera: Any disease characterized by repeated simultaneous purging and vomiting, with painful spasms of the stomach and bowels and occasional cramps of the external muscles; as commonly used, Asiatic cholera. [Appleton1904]; term first used c. 14th century.

Consumption: Any wasting away of the body, but usually applied to Phthisis Pulmonalis [Thomas 1875]

Dysentery: Inflammation of the mucous membrane of the large intestine; fever...with frequent mucous or bloody evacuations.

Miasma: Floating and impalpable morbid effluvia, the product of decay or putrefaction of animal and vegetable substances. [Thomas 1875]

Phthisis: Pulmonary consumption. It is known by emaciation, debility, cough, hectic fever, and purulent expectoration. [Hooper1843]

Smallpox: An acute, highly infectious, often fatal disease caused by a poxvirus and characterized by high fever and aches with subsequent widespread eruption of pimples that blister, produce pus, and form pockmarks. Also called variola. [Heritage]; term first used c. 1588.

Typhus: Malignant fever. [Hoblyn 1855]; a kind of continued fever, attended with great prostration of the nervous and vascular systems, with a tendency to putrefaction in the fluids, and vitiation of the secretions; putrid fever. [Thomas1875]; not to be confused with typhoid fever.

Questions to ask:

1. What was going on in my ancestors' world? What kinds of conditions were they living and working in, and what impact did those conditions have on their health?
2. What were they doing about diseases? What were the 'medical practices' of the day and who was administering them? What was the experience of particular diseases?
3. Were there any extraordinary events in the time periods I'm researching (natural disasters, wars, etc.)?

Book Resources:

Reference Books / Dictionaries:

A Medical Miscellany for Genealogists by Dr. Jeanette L. Jerger (Heritage Books)

What Did They Mean By That? A Dictionary of Historical & Genealogical Terms Old and New, by Paul Drake (Heritage Books)

Medicine and Society in America (Perspectives on History Series) edited by Jennifer Hanson

Histories of Medicine and Disease:

Frontier Medicine, From the Atlantic to the Pacific, 1492-1941, by David Dary (A. Knopf)

The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America by Gerald N. Grob (Harvard Univ. Press)

Quinine and Quarantine: Missouri Medicine Through the Years by Loren Humphrey

Challenging Chicago: Coping With Everyday Life 1837-1920, by Perry R. Duis (U of Illinois Press)

A Midwife's Tale by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (A. Knopf)

Every Day Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (G. F. Dow)

Forgotten Ellis Island: The Extraordinary Story of America's Immigrant Hospital (Lorie Conway)

Biographies of Disease, William and Helen Bynum, Series Editors (Oxford U Press)

Internet Resources:

Glossary of diseases: <http://www.antiquusmorbus.com/> [small fee for downloading PDF]

Rootsweb maillist – medical genealogy:

http://lists.rootsweb.ancestry.com/index/other/Medical_Genealogy/MEDICAL-GENEALOGY.html [not a very active list, but search past postings]

Investigating Death Investigations: <http://www.propublica.org/getinvolved/item/how-to-investigate-coroners-and-medical-examiners> [written for modern-day reporters but some good tips on how to examine death investigations in the past]

U.S. National Library of Medicine: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/collections/photos/> [images are currently unavailable but explore website for other info on history of medicine in America].

Sources for Finding Family Health Histories:

1. **Family diaries, letters, photos**: Examine photos for signs of maladies or deformities.
2. **Death records**: Includes obituary, death register, cemetery record, funeral home, coroner's report, state death index. For SSDI, use <http://stevemorse.org/ssdi/ssdi.html> to search several websites' versions of the index in one step.
3. **Hospital records**: Old records usually include admittance & patient info, not charts. If still in business, write the hospital re availability of archived patient information. Check FamilySearch catalog (keyword search). <https://familysearch.org/catalog-search> Check manuscript collections. <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>
4. **Insurance records**:
1865: insurance companies start collecting medical data.
Retention of files is variable. Contact company's home office re archived files.
Don't forget fraternal organizations and immigrant aid societies that offered life insurance benefits.
5. **1850, 1860, 1870, & 1880 census mortality schedules** (those who died in previous 12 mths) = yields info on month & cause of death)
6. **"DDD" schedules in 1880** (checkmark in columns 15-20: "defective, dependent adult, and delinquent")