The preservation of history is spotty. Where artifacts still exist or strong memories persist, the stories remain vivid and detailed, but when the evidence is sparse or the subject unpleasant, stories fade away, surviving only as whispers of what happened. For example, few know that at one time Exeter like other towns in Rhode Island quarantined the victims of smallpox to wait out the course of this sometimes lethal disease. Sick people were housed at a long-gone farm that now has reverted to woodland crossed by gentle streams. Some who stayed at the farm succumbed to the disease and were buried in a nearby cemetery. Although much of the information about this farm has disappeared, something of a story can be pulled together from various scattered fragments. But first some background about smallpox.

The emergence of smallpox as a human disease may have occurred as recently as 3,000 to 10,000 years ago based on genetic variations between different strains of the *Variola* virus. The earliest physical evidence of smallpox can be traced to the mummy of Egyptian pharaoh Ramses V. By the 16th century it was widely present in Europe and spreading because of worldwide exploration and colonization. Smallpox came to the Caribbean in 1509 and to New England a century later when it decimated Native American populations. By 1750 it was a leading cause of death. A form of inoculation called “variolation” began to reduce its effects among North American colonists at the end of that century. When vaccination became common at the end of the 19th century, incidence of the disease declined. To combat it, several states required mandatory vaccination between 1843 and 1855. Within fifty years smallpox was mostly gone in the United States and eventually certified as globally eradicated in 1979.
Published records of the Rhode Island Department of Health began in 1879 with towns indicating the number of people suffering from contagious diseases. Reports from every town indicated no evidence of smallpox.

The Rhode Island Medical Society published a History of Smallpox in Rhode Island in a 1902 issue of its journal. Among the significant events cited were the first severe outbreak of smallpox in 1690, construction of the first quarantine facility in Bristol in 1732, the introduction of inoculation and public opposition to it in 1772, and a vote in the RI Assembly in 1776 to establish a smallpox hospital in each county to provide inoculations. A hospital in Newport was built in 1792 to replace the more distant one on Conanicut Island (Jamestown) and over 100 persons were inoculation there in first year. In 1801 Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse introduced a method of vaccination in Rhode Island using the “cow pox method” discovered a few years earlier by the English physician Edward Jenner. Jenner found that exposure to a viral disease of cows could provide immunity to smallpox. Some people ridiculed the idea by suggesting those vaccinated would grow horns and hoofs, but despite opposition vaccination became more common.

Legislative acts passed as early as 1712 prevented the entrance of ships, goods, sailors, and passengers into Rhode Island ports if it was determined that smallpox infected anyone aboard. An Act of Feb 15, 1743 instructed that “persons taken with the small pox in the county of Newport, to be sent to the pest house, etc.” These so-called pest houses were places of quarantine for persons infected with contagious diseases. Legislation in October 1751 directed “the sum of six hundred pounds be allowed and paid out of the general treasury toward building a pest house” in the town of Providence because none existed there. Smallpox was considered to be so terrible that these Acts specified that any person convicted of willfully spreading it could be subject to capital punishment. In 1798 the State Legislature passed another Act to prevent the spreading of smallpox and other contagious sicknesses. Relevant excerpts stated: “… if it be the small-pox … the Town Council … are authorized … to remove said person … to any such place in said town as they think the most proper, to prevent the spreading of the infection … to confine … in same proper place, until they are recovered …” and officials are “fully empowered to remove any inhabitants … visited with the small-pox … to the hospital … or other convenient place, in order to prevent the spreading of the infection …”

Exeter too had its own smallpox problem in the 19th century. A bit of evidence comes from the records of an 1865 town meeting indicating that Stephen Benjamin was to be paid for services in smallpox case. And still today there is evidence of “Small Pox Cemetery” (Exeter Historical Cemetery 149) as recorded by John Sterling and James Good in their 1994 book on Exeter cemeteries. That location lies east of Sunderland Road at the southern end of the Cuttyhunk Brook Preserve which is owned by the Nature Conservancy.
Now Cuttyhunk is a strange name to be associated with a brook in Exeter. Its origin is obscure. Several local streams are named after early settlers – Dutemple brook and Locke brook are examples – but no person with a name similar to Cuttyhunk exists in town records. Speculating that it may derive from a Narragansett/Wampanoag Indian toponym (place name) I contacted Dr. Francis O’Brien, Jr. of the Aquidneck Indian Council and an expert on Indian place names in Southern New England. His research has shown that common spelling often compare so badly to phonetic spelling that finding a reasonable translation is difficult. Most Southern New Englanders will recognize Cuttyhunk as one of the Elizabeth Islands located south of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. There the name may derive from the Wampanoag word **poo-cutahunk-anow**, meaning "a thing that lies out in the great water" or perhaps **papaquantuck**, meaning "broken land" (Huden, 1962). Neither one of these meanings applies even remotely to a small inland brook.

Alternatively, O’Brien (2010 and personal communication) believes that “cuttyhunk” is derived from a word meaning “principal stream” based on a similarity in other Algonquin languages to the word **kittanging** (Trumbull, 1870) that means “on the greatest stream.” At first this is puzzling because Cuttyhunk brook is so narrow and shallow that it can be crossed in a few steps (see the lead photograph above). On maps, if shown at all, it usually goes unlabeled. In no way does it look like a principal or great stream. It is, however, a tributary of what English settlers called the Queen’s river, the predominant water course in the area, originating in West Greenwich, flowint southward through eastern Exeter, and eventually becomint the Usquepaugh River in South Kingstown. The name plausibly once referred to the whole drainage network but now is restricted to a small woodland brook.

The 800 acres of pine and oak forest in West Greenwich and Exeter that comprise the Cuttyhunk Brook Preserve was assembled from various parcels of which the smallpox farm was one. Early deeds typically described land parcels in terms of their relationship to owners of abutting tracts. Frequently referenced landmarks were stone walls, heaps of stone, trees and sometimes unnamed roads, so precisely locating a lot can be difficult. The earliest mention of a “Small Pox Place” is found in a 1849 deed for 30 acres owned by Beriah H. Lawton. The red circle on this Nature Conservancy map indicates the approximate location of that tract.
Tracing back a sequence of deeds suggests that the lot was inherited from Caleb Lawton who had purchased it from Robert Reynolds for $230 in 1807. Reynolds may have acquired the land before the 1760s when Rhode Island was still an English colony.

Going forward in time Beriah Lawton sold to John Corey a tract of land known as the Small Pox Place in 1850 for $450. Over the years the property passed to others, eventually ending up with William L. and Pearl J. Sunderland as joint tenants in the 1930s. Each of these deeds recorded the transfer with reference to the Small Pox Place. Adjacent lots were added at various times and ultimately a 275 acre tract identified on town maps as Parcel ID: 25-4-1 was sold to the Nature Conservancy in 2001 for $930,000. Although no longer identified as the Small Pox Place, the original 30 acres were part of the whole.

A last piece of tangible evidence persists as Exeter Historical Cemetery 149 – known as the Small Pox Cemetery. Only one grave marker can be found, a carved slab of white limestone erected in memory of Sarah Clarke Fenner who died in 1854. Inquiries about her to a Fenner family descendent and genealogist provided no other information or even if smallpox caused her demise. No other markers have been found in the cemetery. It’s assumed that the graves of others were not permanently marked. In fact, no records exist about whom else or how many might be interred there. Near the cemetery are two stone foundations that may have been a barn and shop at the farm where quarantined residents stayed and perhaps worked for their keep.
So a long story ends here with little more information than that Exeter maintained a smallpox quarantine from the 1840s to perhaps as late as 1880. With luck, more of the story might be discovered hidden away in a scrapbook or old document. Otherwise, the legacy of smallpox in Exeter will continue to fade away. If you wish to visit the site and imagine what life was like back then, find the Preserve parking area on Sunderland Road and follow a dirt trail eastward for about a half mile. Cross the little Cuttyhunk brook bridge then turn left and proceed up the trail to the cemetery resting quietly under a canopy of pine trees.

Sources


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