

# The Lepers of New Brunswick



Tracadie Lazaretto

# **The Lepers of New Brunswick**

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Written and produced by Miramichi Literacy Writers, a Project of the Literacy Corps Program, Employment and Immigration, Canada, sponsored by Miramichi Literacy Council, New Brunswick

Readability Level 4.9

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ISBN-0-920709-09-5

Miramichi Literacy Council - Miramichi Literacy Writers series

This series of booklets are available to anyone who wishes to order them. A single copy is \$3.00, any 3 books would be \$8.00 and a complete set of 24 would be \$60.00. Shipping and handling are extra.

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Acknowledgements: We wish to acknowledge support funding from the Governments of Canada and the Province of New Brunswick, especially the Departments of Education and Continuing Education.



A Leper Patient

# **THE LEPERS OF NEW BRUNSWICK**

## **CHAPTER I**

One of the most feared diseases in the history of mankind is the disease of leprosy. The fear of leprosy goes back thousands of years to Bible times. One Bible story tells of Lazarus who died of leprosy. There are also stories of Jesus who was able to cure leprosy by laying his hands on the diseased people. He showed no fear of the lepers.

Throughout history, those people with leprosy were kept away from all others. In Scotland at one time the diseased lepers were hanged if they tried to run away from the leper hospitals. In other countries, lepers had to wear bells to let people know they were nearby.

People feared the lepers because so little was known about the disease. They heard so many different stories about what to believe. Some thought it could be caught from other lepers. Even wild stories about ways to catch leprosy were partly believed. Some thought that poor food, no running water in the homes and not being clean were some of the possible causes of leprosy.

Today, we know much more about leprosy than in the past. It is a disease caused by bacteria that find their way into the body. Doctors don't know how the bacteria get into the body. They believe that the bacteria come from sores on the leper. When these sores break open, the bacteria can be caught by other people. The bacteria get into the skin of the healthy person through cuts or insect bites. The open sores can be very painful to the leper.

Leprosy is not easily caught from another person. For example, there were children born to leper mothers in the Tracadie Leper Hospital who never got the disease. It takes a long time for the disease to grow in the body. It may take years before sores can be seen. These sores are often the last sign of the disease. It also seems that some people are more likely to catch the disease than others.

The first known case of leprosy in New Brunswick was recorded in 1828. Nobody had ever seen such an awful disease before. They didn't even have a name for it. The disease broke out in the French part of New Brunswick near Tracadie. The French called the disease "la maladie". In English, that means "little sickness." The correct name for leprosy is Hansen's Disease. It was named after Doctor G.H. Hansen. He was a doctor from Norway. In 1874, he discovered the bacteria that causes leprosy.



The map shows Tracadie where the leper hospital called a lazaretto was built.

## CHAPTER II

The first leper in New Brunswick was Ursule Landry. She was from Tracadie. Leprosy spread quickly to many families in Tracadie. Many of Ursule Landry's relatives got the disease. Her sister and their children caught it and so the disease spread. The wooden box in which Landry was put when she died cause a cut on one of the men carrying it. He caught "Ia maladie" and died a leper.

About the same time, a Newcastle woman died from leprosy. He name was Mary Gardiner. For some reason, the disease was not caught by many people in Newcastle. There were a few cases in Nelson, but not many.

How did Hansen's Disease spread to Canada? No knows for sure. One story tells of Ursule Landry doing laundry for some men from a French ship. Some of these men may have been lepers. Some believe believe that leprosy may have reached Tracadie because of two men from Norway. They ran away from a leper house in Norway and arrived in Caraquet. From there, they walked to Tracadie. They stayed overnight at Ursule Landry's home. It is possible she caught the disease from them.

For the next fifteen years, the disease continued to spread in Tracadie. As many as twenty people lived in small two and three- room houses. It is little wonder that the disease spread as quickly as it did. By 1844, nine people had died from "Ia maladie." The Government of New Brunswick had done nothing up to this point. However, they decided to act when trade with other parts of Canada began falling off because of the fear of leprosy.



Ursule Landry talking to two lepers.

### CHAPTER III

The government's first problem was to find a place to build a Lazaretto. A Lazaretto is a hospital for lepers. The government chose Sheldrake Island for the first Lazaretto. Sheldrake is an island in the Miramichi River not far from Loggieville. They chose this island for many reasons. First, there was a doctor in Chatham to treat the lepers. Also the government owned the island. There were buildings on the island that could be used as a lazaretto if repaired. On the island the lepers could be kept away from everyone else.

The Tracadie lepers decided to go to Sheldrake Island. Some were made to go by the police. The police could go into a home and take away any person thought to have leprosy. Others left because Father Gauvreau told them they would be well looked after. Father Gauvreau was the head of the Catholic Church in Tracadie. All the lepers were Catholic and they believed everything Father Gauvreau said.



A young leper patient

When the lepers arrived on Sheldrake Island, there was no one to look after them. They had to run the hospital for themselves. They had to do all the cooking, cleaning and washing. Firewood had to be cut and some of the trees on the island had to be removed.

There were many problems with the Sheldrake lazaretto from the beginning. The buildings were old and poorly repaired. The lepers were taken from their families to an island fifty miles from their homes. In winter, they were cold and the food was bad. There were only two rooms for the lepers to stay in. One was for the woman and the other for the men. The badly-diseased people had to stay in the same room with the ones that weren't as sick.



At that time, there was no cure for Hansen's Disease. The very sick lepers had their hair fall out. Sometimes they became blind, and their sores were filled with insects. Often the mouth and nose became very sore. Breathing was hard towards the end. Teeth fell out. Noses and fingers started to fall off. Lips became large sores. Some were so badly diseased that they didn't look human. Poor doctor care and little medicine made it hard for the lepers to go on. The smell in the lazaretto was very bad.

The lepers didn't like the lazaretto at all. They thought of it as a prison where they were sent to die a slow death. They were treated so poorly that they ran away. Barnabe Savoie, a ten-year old leper, got off the island and went back to his family. He was taken away from his father at gunpoint, tied up with ropes and brought back to Shelldrake.

The government paid a man to watch the island. He carried a gun to stop the lepers from getting away. This made them so angry that they burned down the lazaretto in 1845. Another hospital was soon built, but was no better than the first one.

At this time many people began arriving from Ireland. These people wanted to live on the Miramichi. But they brought many diseases with them. The government needed Shelldrake Island as a place to put them until they were cured. Also, Father Gauvreau wanted the lepers moved to Tracadie where they would be close to their homes. For these reasons, the lazaretto was moved to Tracadie in 1849. Thirty-seven people arrived in the five years the Shelldrake hospital was open. Fifteen of them died, five ran away, and seventeen were sent to the new lazaretto in Tracadie.

## CHAPTER IV

The Tracadie lazaretto had to be completed before the lepers could move in because the builders would not work near the diseased people. Many more lepers came to the new lazaretto because they thought they would be offered better care. At first, there were no doctors to care for them. Father Gauvreau was the only one who knew anything about medicine. He did all he could for the sick.



Tracadie Lazaretto

Many new lepers came to the lazaretto when Dr. LaBiliois arrived in the early 1850's. By now, Dr. LaBiliois claimed he had a cure for the disease. In fact, many of the lepers seemed to improve. Some were even said to be completely cured and were sent home. But most of the sick had to return because their improvement did not continue. For sixteen months, Dr. LaBiliois worked at the hospital. But the government never paid for any of his work. For many years after, the people of Tracadie still spoke kindly of Dr. LaBiliois. The lepers often asked to have him come back because they believed they might be cured.

After Dr. LaBiliois left, most of the sick people had no hope. Many of them started to run away again. Some went as far as Quebec and the United States looking for work. Most returned home when the awful signs of their disease became known.

Those left in the hospital were so discouraged that they burned down the wooden lazaretto in 1852. The blind lepers had a hard time getting away from the fire, but all were saved. A new hospital was built in 1853. It was made of wood and wasn't any bigger or better than the old one. It had bars on the windows and a high wooden fence around it.

Life at the leper hospital did not improve much for the next ten years. From 1844 to 1862, some ninety-six people went into the lazaretto. Of these, seventy-two died and three were sent home. Sometimes, a person would be admitted who didn't have leprosy. It usually took many years to correct the problem before the person was let out.



Dr. James Nicholson.

In 1862, Dr. Nicholson was appointed by the New Brunswick government to treat the lepers. He was the first doctor at the hospital since Dr. LaBilios. Shortly after arriving, he had the wooden walls torn down and the bars on the windows removed. He also had all the sick people outdoors getting fresh air. Dr. Nicholson did not look for a cure for the disease because he thought it was incurable.

Dr. Nicholson liked to drink a lot and took no care about catching leprosy himself. He would often 'pass out' in the same room as the lepers. In 1865, he died from a lung disease.

The next doctor to arrive was Doctor Smith. He was to spend the next forty-four years working with the lepers. Dr. Smith was not very well-liked by the people of Tracadie. There were many reasons for this. He spoke only English. He wasn't Catholic. He was very quiet and hard to get to know. He thought he was of a higher class than the French people he served. People disliked him even more because he wanted to put anyone he thought might have leprosy in the lazaretto. In that way, he hoped to end the disease.



Dr. A.C. Smith

## CHAPTER V



One doctor working alone could not look after all the sick people. There was a great need for nurses to care for the lepers. Bishop Rogers of Chatham thought of an idea. He was able to get seven Sisters of Charity of Hotel Dieu in Montreal to come to Tracadie in 1868. Sister St. Jean was the most important Sister because she knew a lot of medicines. Not only did she treat the lepers, but she also gave medicines to any sick person in the village.

Soon after the Sisters arrived, they started making changes. Air and light were let into the hospital. The boys were taught to make footwear and farm equipment. The girls learned to sew. All the children were taught to read and write. The teachings of the Catholic Church became an important part of everyday life at the lazaretto. This helped some of the sick because they believed in a new life after death. New clothes were given out every six months. The old clothes were then burned. The Sisters kept the hospital very clean.

Some of the changes the sisters made were not well-liked. Sometimes the lepers kept farm animals right in the hospital. The sisters ended this practice quickly. The sisters wouldn't let the men and women lepers mix in the same room. The men had to stay on the first floor and the women on the second. Although the lepers got good nursing care, the number of deaths stayed high. Even the sisters felt the disease was incurable. They took great care not to catch "la maladie." Some of them died from lung disease but not one of them became a leper.

Life in the lazaretto continued to be very cheerless. Relatives did not come to the hospital often. The sick people had lost their families, homes, freedom and their looks. Near the end, the lepers were in great pain. Their minds were not physically damaged. Yet some of them had to be locked up. They would go out of their minds because they felt their lives were over. Some lepers even believed they were not cured because then there would be no reason to keep the hospital open.



The Sisters with two leper children.

## CHAPTER VI

Father Gauvreau left Tracadie for the last time in 1871. He was replaced by Father Babineau. For more than thirty years, Father Babineau worked hard to improve the lazaretto and the life of the lepers there.

Many improvements were made when the Federal Government of Canada took over the hospital in 1880. A new kitchen, laundry room, and storeroom were built. In 1882, a new section was added to the hospital for the really bad cases. These lepers were kept away from the others.

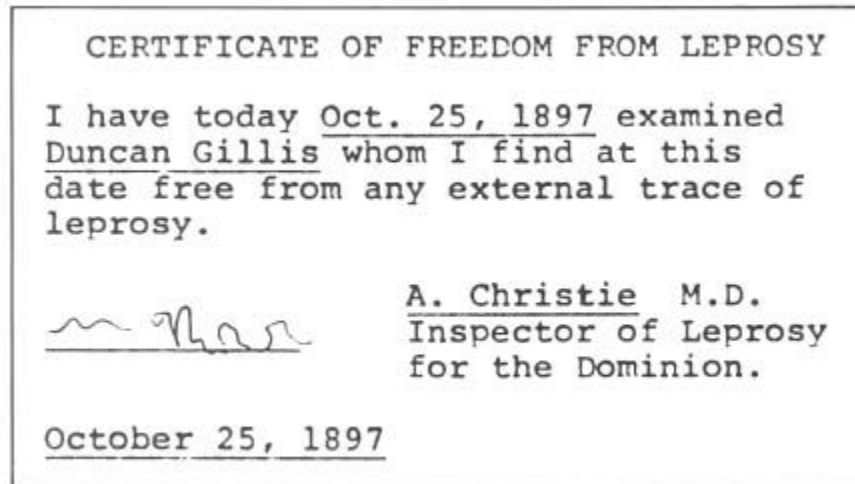
Even with all the improvements, life was still very hard. The building was very cold in winter. Each leper only had one blanket to keep him warm. There were so many rats that the sick could not sleep at night. The only way to get fresh water in the winter was to heat ice or snow. Often the food was very poor. There was no way to keep the meat fresh and it sometimes went bad.



Rev. Joseph-Auguste Babineau

## CHAPTER VII

Father Babineau and the Sisters were very hard workers. They saw the need for a new hospital. They kept the pressure on the government by writing many letters. In 1894, their dream came true. A new stone lazaretto was finished. For the first time, the lepers had something to look forward to. There was great happiness the day the sick people moved into the new lazaretto. But there was one other day when they were happier. That was when they got their signed papers saying they were free of the disease.



After all the hard work to get the hospital built, there wasn't as great a need for it. By 1897, there were only twenty known lepers in Tracadie. Most of them were older and had lived in the lazaretto all their lives.

The new hospital could care for fifty people at one time. Since there were so few cases in New Brunswick, the government decided to bring lepers from other parts of Canada to Tracadie. There were only fourteen people left in the lazaretto by 1901. That number continued to fall as the years passed and no new cases came in. By 1965, there was only one person left in the Tracadie lazaretto and she was cured. When the Sisters found a place for her to stay in a Saint John home for old people, the hospital closed for the last time.



It is not known how many people died of Hansen's Disease in New Brunswick through the years. The records at the Tracadie Lazaretto were very poorly kept.

There are still cases of leprosy in Canada today. However, a new medicine called Diasone has greatly helped in the treatment of Hansen's Disease. The leper must be kept in the hospital for one month away from other people. Then they can be treated at home and live a life as others do.

There are no lazarettos left open in Canada today. The Tracadie hospital is still standing, but it is now used as a home for old people. The last lazaretto left in North America is in Alabama in the United States.

The fear of leprosy is believed to have caused Tracadie to grow slower than most towns. Government money went to other places, but not there. Many people simply would not move to Tracadie.

For years, people would cross the street instead of passing by the lazaretto. Those who have had relatives in the lazaretto won't admit to it. Even the few lepers left in Canada today refuse to talk about their problem. They know that "Ia maladie" is still the most feared and poorest understood disease in history.

## WORD LIST

bacteria

disease

fear

lazaretto

leprosy

sores

spread

Acknowledgements:

We wish to acknowledge M.J. Losier and Selina Pinet of **Children of Lazarus**, from whose book much of our information was taken and summarized.