

GROSSE-ISLE
EMIGRANT STATION.

A LETTER ADDRESSED
TO THE
INSPECTORS
OF
HOSPITALS, PRISONS AND
ASYLUMS.

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(Report of Medical Superintendant 1845.)

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To the Inspectors of Prisons, Hospitals, &c.

Gentlemen,

On my return to Quebec, after an absence of some weeks, my attention has been called to an article in the *Medical Chronicle* commenting approvingly upon the action of the Provincial Government in abolishing the Grosse-Isle Establishment, and requiring emigrant vessels to perform a Quarantine under certain circumstances off the River St. Charles. The Editor asserts that the expense of this Establishment has been £8000 per annum. On application to the proper quarter, he would have learnt that the total cost was about one fourth of this sum (that is £2000). He also makes one or two assertions equally reckless, which I beg to correct. Before doing this I will, as one knowing something of the working of the Establishment (now abolished for a time at least) endeavour concisely to recall the circumstances which first led to its formation. In 1831 the appearance of Asiatic cholera in Europe excited alarm in this country; and the Legislature, in the winter of 1832, made an appropriation for the purpose of enforcing an inspection of all vessels arriving by the St. Lawrence, with the view of preventing the introduction of this new unknown and much dreaded disease. Admiral (then Captain) Bayfield was called upon to select a site for the purpose. On his report Grosse Isle was chosen as being the only Island having deep water and accessible at all times of the tide, and also at a sufficient distance not only from the City of Quebec, but from all settlements. Temporary sheds were hastily put up, and a large

military force sent down, the whole being constituted a military post under a Commandant and Staff of Military Officers.

The principal medical man in charge was Dr. Griffin and subsequently the late Dr. Crawford of Montreal, then an Army Assistant Surgeon; a strict Quarantine, as practiced in the Mediterranean was attempted, but here (as I believe everywhere else) it was found impossible to arrest the progress of that inscrutable and then unknown disease by any Quarantine Regulations.

The advantages of the Establishment were however found to be so great in keeping out Fever, Small Pox and other like diseases from the crowded lodging houses of the City, as well as in affording the convenience of a place where the multitude of passengers could wash and refit after their long sea voyage that the Legislature made an appropriation for the purchase of the Island, for which the sum of \$14,000 was paid. Other buildings were erected, very insufficient for the purpose, and the difficulty of landing from vessels by open boats in rough weather was found very inconvenient and dangerous. Very little was done, however, to make the place what it should be, until the terrible invasion of fever-struck starving crowds in 1847, when, with hospital accommodation and bedding barely sufficient for one hundred patients, some thousand immigrants arrived within a few weeks of the opening of the navigation. It is on record that the Government were warned by the writer of these pages the year *previous* what was likely to happen, and they were urged in vain to provide for the coming danger. The sights and scenes which passed that year on this Island exceeded in horror all that has ever been written

of plague-struck cities in the middle ages, and of which the writer may say :

; quæque ipse miserrima vidi
Et quorum pars magna fui.

The Atlantic Ocean was dotted with the bodies of upwards of five thousands immigrants thrown over-board in the middle passage. Passenger ships arrived at Grosse Isle with the remnant of a phantom crew ; in some vessels the deaths on the passage were from 150 to 220, and on arrival there were hardly hands enough left to work the ship into the anchorage. It is needless to attempt to describe the condition of the remaining passengers or the state of filth of the 'tween decks. In some cases dead bodies in a half putrid state were found in the berths, and had to be drawn up on deck with boat hooks ; no one on board having had strength or courage to throw them over-board before arrival. Upwards of 20,000 sick were treated on shore in tents, temporary sheds and on board the vessels that year ; and 3534 were buried in one small spot, relays of men being engaged night and day for many weeks of a sultry summer in digging trenches to bury them.

After the experience of this year, steps were taken to render the establishment better fitted for the purpose contemplated. An excellent deep water wharf was built, and the site of the hospitals was removed to the Eastern end of the Island and separated from that part where healthy Emigrants were landed to wash and purify. Substantial buildings capable of accommodating 5000 souls were put up. Two of these at the hospital and two at the healthy division were double-lined and double-floored, and heated by stoves, so as to serve during the cold weather of early

summer and late in the autumn. Extensive cooking-houses and wash-houses were put up and a large brick oven was constructed, in which feather beds and hair mattresses, landed from infected vessels were subjected to dry heat at a high temperature, being the only certain means yet discovered of disinfecting feathers and hair.

Two neat churches were built, one by the Roman Catholic Church and the other by the Church of England.

Wells were sunk, and various other improvements made to within the last two years. The establishment is now in perfect order, and will class with any other establishment of the kind in the world, both in its natural advantages, and in the arrangements and construction of the different buildings ; this has been done at considerable expense to the Province, in round numbers about £50,000 including the first cost of the Island and the deep water wharf, &c.

To enable the Public and the Editor of the *Medical Chronicle* to form an opinion of the advantages of the Lazaretto, I will detail the *routine* observed on the arrival of an emigrant vessel, whose passengers are in a sickly or dirty condition. The vessel on arrival is boarded by the Inspecting Physician who calls upon the Master to furnish a statement of the health of his passengers on the voyage ; the names, ages and disease of all those who have died on the passage are taken down ; the number, names, &c., of all the sick on board are taken and all other particulars.

The supply of medicine and medical comforts with which the vessel left the port is ascertained. An order is then made out for the admission to hospital of the sick. The healthy passengers are

then all mustered in a body on deck in the forepart of the vessel; the inspecting physician goes into the 'tween decks and examines every berth, ascertains the condition of the sick and compares the number and names with those given by the Captain. The passengers are then passed aft one by one and a personal inspection made of each individual; among these there are generally found a certain number in an incipient stage of disease whose names are added to the return of sick. A note is taken of all insane, blind, dumb, and cripples unaccompanied by friends able to support them. A return of such is made to the Collector of Customs who exacts bonds from the vessel that such people do not become a burthen to the Province; this precaution having been found necessary in consequence of the introduction of such helpless people. A similar law was first passed by the state of New-York and until a like enactment was passed here we had the benefit of all those who could not pass in New-York. After this inspection the Pilot is directed to haul alongside the wharf at the healthy division where those in good health walk on shore and have assigned to them one of the large buildings, which is white-washed after its occupation by each lot of Emigrants, these sheds are all fitted up with berth places ranged on each side similar to those in the 'tween decks of the vessel; into this building the passengers remove with their baggage, to enable them to transport which, from the wharf to the sheds they are furnished with low trucks on iron wheels. The exclusive use of a cook house fitted up with boilers and open fire places is assigned to them as also the use of a large wash house in which down the centre are ranges of boilers set in brick and open fire places.

and around the sides of the building are troughs for washing ; this building is placed close to and partly over the water which is here fresh. They are supplied with fuel wood cut on the Island for the purpose by the party who remain during the winter in charge of the buildings, &c.

The healthy being thus disposed of, the sick have in the meantime been conveyed to the hospitals situated as already said at the Eastern extremity of the Island, their transport there is effected either in the ships boats (if the weather and tide admit,) or if these do not answer they are conveyed in a covered carriage, on springs, over a smooth gravel road. At the hospitals they are received by the Steward and Matron who having been previously notified of the number they have to receive, have made all the necessary preparations for their reception and comfort. They are before admission taken to the bath house, their hair cut and their usually filthy clothes removed, and being clad in hospital garments are placed in the hospital set apart for the particular disease under which they labour. Each hospital has a separate small cook and wash house, so that patients and their attendants in the Small Pox Hospital have no communication with those in the Fever hospital which is distinct in all its details, having a special nurse and orderly.

To return to the healthy, these after being all landed with every article of bedding and wearing apparel, etc., are set to wash, purify and clean, the straw and seaweed (German emigrants all use dry seaweed in place of straw) is emptied out of the beds and burnt in heaps at low water mark, fresh straw is issued from a store in the Island.

The hold and 'tween decks of the vessel is then thoroughly cleaned and (if painted) is scrubbed down with soap and water (if not painted) the wood work is well whitewashed with quick lime which is supplied from a stock kept in the Island.

This being done and any foul ballast thrown out, the master of the vessel has the option of proceeding at once to Quebec upon entering into a bond to send a steamer for his passengers or to pay to the emigrant Agent the sum of one shilling sterling per adult to cover the cost of their transport by steamer. The great number of ship masters prefer paying this trifling sum rather than be detained. The emigrant is also a gainer by this arrangement in being able to reach Quebec in less than three hours instead of being sometimes as many days working up with the vessel; during the emigrants' detention in the Island he is fed in the same manner as if on board the ship. The vessel is bound to provide for him until his arrival in Port.

The whole of these conveniences are afforded to the vessel and passengers without cost or charge of any kind whatever. They are not called upon to disburse one farthing either for fuel, straw, lime or anything else (save and except the transport by steamer to Quebec if the same his had). The convalescents on their discharge from hospital are sent up at the cost of the Province.

There has been no need of store or shop in the Island for the last two or three years and no inducement to the emigrant to spend his little means nor does he require to do so as the vessel as already stated is bound by the present Imperial Passenger Act to supply a sufficiency of good food in a cooked state. In all matters connected with this Establishment, the Canadian

Government have acted with a liberality which contrasts most favourably with that of any other Establishment in the world. As the motive for abolishing this Emigrant Station (for it is little more than in name a Quarantine) is its cost to the Province ; it will surprise many to learn that the whole Establishment including the hire of a special Steamer for the duty, the salaries of the officers and every other expense does not much exceed *two thousands pounds*. And by adopting the suggestions made or about to be made as I learn by your Board, this expense might be further reduced nearly one half. This could be effected by dispensing with the exclusive hire of a steamer using instead the Rail-Road which runs on the opposite shore, and by abolishing useless offices, the actual expense of maintaining this Establishment in working order need not exceed one thousand to twelve hundred and fifty pounds. A trifling sum compared to the advantages and convenience of the emigrant and vessel, for even to the latter it is not only a convenience but a saving in all cases where the passengers are sickly and foul ; as by the emigrant act the passengers are intitled to remain 48 hours on board after the ship arrives in harbour receiving the same food, berthing, etc., as on the voyage. Now when the vessel lands her passengers at Grosse-Isle, (which ship masters sometimes ask permission to do, even when there is no sickness,) they are saved this detention and expense in Quebec, and the Emigrant escapes in a measure the expenditure he would have to incur in lodgings, etc , while refitting and washing after the sea voyage.

In the very able pamphlet published in England by the Hon. A. T. Galt, the advantages of this Esta-

blishment to intending Emigrants is held out as follows :

“ The Settlement of the country has at all times
“ been a subject of deep interest in Canada, and has
“ been promoted in every possible way. *Emigrants*
“ *are received on arrival at the Quarantine Station*
“ *where hospitals and medical care are provided free*
“ *of charge* ; they receive from Government officers
“ reliable information on every point necessary for
“ their welfare. ”

It should further be noticed that the cost of this station is paid out of funds raised by a capitation tax levied upon every Emigrant over one year old, who arrives in the Province (vide Emigration Act, 16 Vict., C. 86, S. 22). And it is well known that, during many years, this tax left a large surplus over the cost of maintaining the Emigrant Station at Grosse-Isle ; and if it has fallen short a little, during the last two years, the Province is not as yet a loser. The large sum expended in 1847, a part of which was for the erection of buildings, was refunded to the Province by the Imperial Government. I will venture to state that the small saving (if any) which is anticipated from abolishing this Establishment, might be more easily effected by dispensing with some of the many Emigrant Agencies throughout the Country ; more than one of which with their staff of Deputies, Clerks, Interpreters, Porters or Messengers will be found to cost the Province more than the whole expenditure of the Grosse-Isle Station. And I think no unprejudiced person at all conversant with the subject would hesitate for a moment in deciding which affords the most real benefit to the Emigrant. It is well known that the only Emigrant, who seeks voluntarily the advice of

the Emigrant Agent, is the one who holds out his hand at the same time for pecuniary aid in the shape of a free passage. From an intimate knowledge of the subject and an experience of twenty-six years, during which the writer has seen and inspected upwards of 700,000 Emigrants, he can say that not one in ten thousand comes out to this country without some destination in view, from which they are not to be turned by all the Emigrant Agents in the Province; however much they may, and do conceal this destination, whenever it may be to the United States, in the hope of obtaining pecuniary aid with the advice tendered to them. Infractions of the Imperial Passenger Act are now rare; and the only person in a position to ascertain or to investigate them, is the medical officer who sees the passengers on their arrival and can establish the effect of such infractions of the Act upon the health and condition of the Passengers during the voyage.

The Regulations for the ensuing year have however been issued by Proclamation, and the Establishment at Grosse-Isle, now that all expense has been incurred and that it is in working order, is not to be used, except in certain cases where a vessel is reported to be very sickly, &c.; all other vessels will after a medical inspection, either clean, wash and purify on board off the River St. Charles in the Port of Quebec, or proceed at once to their destination; for though the Regulations require in certain cases that Emigrants should be landed to wash and purify on shore, yet as no place is mentioned, and as there is none either off the River St. Charles or in the Port and harbour of Quebec where such washing and purification could be done, that part of the Regulations must be considered a dead letter. The yards of the Marine Hospi-

tal have been suggested, but independently of its inaccessability save at high tide and in smooth weather, the distance is such as to render it impossible to transport Emigrants to and from in open boats with their baggage; and there is not space or convenience but for a very limited number, nor any of those facilities for washing, &c., which experience has shewn to be necessary, and which have been constructed at so much expense at Grosse-Isle. And again its situation in the immediate vicinity of a populous suburb inhabited by a very excitable people, who would either fly their homes on the first report that a cargo of sickly Emigrants had been landed to wash and be disinfected; or, what is even more likely, would resort to acts of violence such as took place within a short time at Staten Island and obliged the authorities of the State of New-York to abandon the Establishment on that now populous Island, and remove the hospitals to Black-wall Island which possesses the advantage of isolation, &c., as Grosse-Isle also does in an eminent degree.

It is well known that every State and Province, having Atlantic sea ports, have been compelled to establish some place (generally an Island) where Emigrant vessels on arrival are visited, and afforded the convenience of washing and purifying, and have their sick passengers landed and sent to hospitals.

There is nothing in Europe analagous to the transit of passengers to the coast of America. It is an *exodus* of a multitude of both sexes of all ages from the new born infant to the tottering non agerian; and they are composed in a great measure of a class of people in humble circumstances, whose lives have previously been passed in agricultural pursuits in the open country, accustomed to breathe a pure

air and to take hard exercise ; these people leave their rural homes, their hill tops and quiet vallies to travel in the first instance down to the sea port town, where they are often detained days, and sometimes weeks, in miserable crowded lodgings awaiting the sailing of the vessel. And when once on board they are placed in circumstances, as regards fresh air and food, very different from what they had hitherto been accustomed to. They are packed in the hold of the vessel, where ventilation under the most favourable circumstances is very imperfect ; a means of introducing fresh air into the 'tween decks of a ship has yet to be discovered, and the little air, that ever does find its way by the open hatches, is in rough weather diminished by the necessity of partially or wholly closing these only openings. It is not to be wondered then that such diseases as originate in imperfect ventilation, change of diet and want of exercise should be rife in Emigrant vessels, or that the vitiated air combined with mental anxiety and dread at the novel scenes passing around them on the sea voyage should have a depressing effect upon the passengers and make them neglect cleanliness and that such neglect should be followed by disease which, when once it begins in the tween decks of a passenger vessel, goes on increasing until its living cargo can be emptied out.

The emigration to Canada has, for many years and up to within a recent period, averaged from 25,000 to 30,000 per annum, and there is every reason to believe that it will again reach that number. It has been said by those who ought to know better that passengers now arrive by the steamers and not sailing vessels ; and, though it is well known that steerage passengers do arrive and in numbers by the Mail and

Anchor line of steamers, yet if every one of these steamers was to bring the complement of passengers allowed by the Passenger Act, they could not bring more than about one fourth of an average emigration. It is also well known that the Norwegian and German emigrants, who now constitute the great bulk of our Passengers, come out direct from Ports of their own country.

The number arriving in the Province has more than once fallen much lower than it has done during the last two years. In 1838 the number was only 2,918 and in the following year under 7,000 while the two years previous it has been 30 or 40,000; and after these years it again rose to 40,000 and 50,000, and in 1847 to 100,000. Nor have I any doubt that it will rise again to the average of past years, if means are adopted to foster it by inducing Emigrants to settle in the Province instead of permitting those who have access to them on arrival using their influence to send them to the Western-States for the benefit of competing Rail-Road Companies and Opposition Steamers that can afford to pay well for such services.

