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The Leper Boy of Pawtucket

Mass. leper colony off nearby New Bedford, Mass., refuses to accept patient

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The newspaper headlines in May 1911 called him the leper boy of Pawtucket or Pawtucket’s boy leper. His name was Harry Sheridan. He was 15 years old at the time of his diagnosis, arrived at by doctors at the Massachusetts General Hospital, where his father, Edward P. Sheridan, superintendent of the Lumb Knitting Co. in Pawtucket, had taken him for care.

When news of Harry’s leprosy spread, parents in the Darlington, Pawtucket school where the boy was a student became alarmed, although Pawtucket physicians said that “no danger of contagion menaces the other pupils,” according to one newspaper report. The school was closed for fumigation and then re-opened.

When Harry’s father brought him home from the hospital, “or spirited him away,” as the New York Times of May 8, 1911 reported, four policemen were sent to guard the Sheridan home, barring visitors from entering and Harry from leaving. Four siblings inside showed no signs of the disease. The article suggested the Boston hospital and Harry’s father could be held liable for bringing “a contagious disease into the state.” The father promised to keep him isolated, but this was unacceptable to local and state health officials.

The Times further reported that the father refused to adhere to the request by city health officer, DR. B.U. RICHARDS, after consulting with DR. GARDNER T. SWARTS, secretary of the Rhode Island Board of Health, to try and get Harry admitted to the Penikese Leper Colony located on an island off New Bedford, Mass., and run by the state of Massachusetts, or, alternatively, to house him at the Pawtucket Pest House for the remainder of his life. The so-called pest house on Brook Street had been used to quarantine patients with smallpox and other communicable diseases, but was unused at the time.

Despite his father’s reluctance, The Health Department applied for young Harry to be admitted to Penikese. The state of Massachusetts did not want to set a precedent in accepting out-of-state patients and declined the request, according to an article in the Boston Globe. RI Gov. Aram Pothier tried to intercede with Massachusetts officials, to no avail.

Ultimately, Edward Sheridan had no choice. The boy was removed to the Pawtucket Pest House, which was renovated for his arrival. One newspaper reported Harry was sent to the “newly equipped detention hospital on the Pawtucket City Farm where he will probably spend the remainder of his life in isolation.”

The account reported the city hired one medical worker to live there, with Harry’s parents allowed to visit once a month.

On June 15, 1911, Dr.
Swarts issued a report on Harry for public health officials. He noted: “the symptoms of the disease probably date back five years,” and described the “type of the disease as nodular and tubercular…affecting the nose and the lips and is quite typical in appearance…the leonine expression is present. Lepra bacilli are present in large quantities in secretions from the nose. The hands are slightly thickened.” There is no mention or speculation as to how Harry contracted the disease.

Harry lived the remainder of his life, a mere four years, tending a garden and a chicken coop on the premises. He died on March 6, 1915, at the age of 19, from “laryngitis believed to have been super-induced by leprosy,” according to a report in the *Boston Globe*.

Six years after Harry’s death, the Penikese leper colony was abandoned, and the buildings and cemetery demolished. Its thirteen patients were sent to a leper colony in Carville, La., in a sealed-off train, the locale closer than the only other leper colony in the United States, in Molokai, Hawaii.

Photos of the Penikese Island Hospital and leper colony located in the Elizabethan Islands 13 miles off the coast of New Bedford, Mass. It was open from 1905–1921 and administered by the Massachusetts State Board of Charity. The photos were printed in a 1944 report by Herman E. Hasseltine, medical director of the US Public Health Service, entitled: History of Leprosy in the New England States.