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[No. 4.

REPORT

UPON THE REMOVAL OF

SWILL AND HOUSE OFFAL,

AND OTHER SUBJECTS.

PRESENTED TO THE BOARD OF HEALTH, JUNE 25TH, 1866, BY THE
SUPERINTENDENT OF HEALTH.



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OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT OF HEALTH, }
PROVIDENCE, June 25, 1866. }

TO THE HONORABLE THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN:

There are several subjects to which I wish to call your attention at this time.

SWILL AND HOUSE OFFAL.

Owing to the unusual interest that has been awakened among the people, in relation to the removal of filth and nuisances from the city, the complaints that swill is not removed have largely increased. The subject is more perplexing, and is surrounded with more difficulties than the people generally suppose. Previous to the establishment of the office of Superintendent of Health, it was the custom of the Board of Aldermen to contract with one person to remove the swill and house offal from the city, and the expense to the city was from \$800 to \$1600 annually.

The arrangement gave general dissatisfaction, and the complaints were numerous and constant. When the subject was placed under my charge, I thought to remedy the trouble by dividing the city into smaller districts, and making contracts with persons who would give more personal attention to it. I was able to find persons who were willing to make contracts to

remove the swill without pay, thus saving from \$800 to \$1600 annually, to the city. This plan has been continued to the present time, except that, in some years, we have been obliged to pay a small sum, not exceeding fifty dollars for each ward, to the contractors. At present, nothing is paid, the swill itself being considered a sufficient remuneration.

So far as efficiency in the removal of the swill is concerned, it is found that it makes no difference whether the contractors are paid or not. There are no more complaints now than formerly, and in the larger portion of the city the swill is removed as thoroughly as it ever has been at any previous period. But the whole system of contracting with private persons to remove the swill is a failure, and I have so reported to your Board at different times.

The following extracts from a report to the Board of Aldermen, made August 15, 1857, will show some of the difficulties with which the subject is surrounded, and every word of it is literally true at the present time :

“ It is becoming evident that this plan will not meet the wants of the public convenience, nor of the public health. Though the work is done, the present year, quite as faithfully, if not more so, than ever before, the complaints are numerous* from all parties, and the system seems to give satisfaction neither to the public nor to the swill contractors.

“ The swill contractors complain that a host of persons, living just beyond the city limits, keep swine, and come into the city and steal and beg a considerable portion of the swill, thus rendering it impossible for the contractors to obtain swill enough to pay for the expense of running their carts. They also complain that some persons put oyster shells, bottles of medicine, and numerous other articles into the swill.

“ The complaints from the people are of every description, and of the most opposite character. The most numerous complaints are, that the swill is not removed, though it is frequently found that the persons making these complaints have previously given their swill to unlicensed persons, and refused it to the swill contractors.

“A large number of persons have presented earnest petitions to the Board of Health, complaining that unlicensed swill gatherers come into their yards, without permission, and steal the swill. They complain that these persons pour the swill on the ground and take such portions as they choose—thus creating a most offensive nuisance. They complain that these persons steal clothes and other articles within their reach. They complain that, frequently, these swill thieves are in league with the servants, and that, while taking the swill, they are assisted to take quantities of valuable food, groceries and other articles. These citizens, therefore, earnestly request that these unlicensed swill gatherers may be prosecuted, and that they may be protected in giving their swill to the regular swill contractors.

“Another class of citizens complains because the unlicensed swill gatherers are prosecuted, and because they are deprived of the privilege of giving their swill to such persons as they choose.

“Another serious trouble in relation to the swill and offal is, that a large portion of our citizens do not realize the importance of having it removed, and will sooner throw it into the yard or into the street than take the trouble to save it for the swill gatherer. Thus we find, that there is trouble in the enforcement of the present laws, and trouble in their non-enforcement; and the consequence of all the trouble is the worst fact of all, namely, that a large portion of the swill and house offal is not removed from the city, but is left to decompose and excite disease among the people. In some conditions of the atmosphere, particularly when there is excessive heat and moisture, and when there is any epidemic influence prevailing, the impure air arising from these collections of swill and house offal, is a most injurious nuisance and a prolific source of diseases. The danger is still greater when, as is frequently the case, the swill and offal are deposited in cellars, or are thrown into privy vaults.

REMEDIES FOR THE SWILL NUISANCE.

“The remedies for the evils resulting from the present system for the removal of swill and house offal, remain to be considered. The present system, if it could be relied upon to accomplish the

object, is the most economical. But it does not accomplish the object. The swill is not removed, and after a trial of many years, the system must be pronounced a failure.

“I am satisfied that the swill and house offal, in this city, will never be effectually removed, so long as those who remove it are dependent, to any extent, for their remuneration, upon the quantity and value of the swill they can collect. There is no doubt that if the swill contractors could have all the swill and house offal in the city, and could receive it in good condition, it would be worth the expense of the collection and removal. But under the present laws and habits of the community, this can never be insured to them. They can obtain only a portion of the swill, and much of that in a worthless condition. The quantity obtained, by daily visits to a large portion of the houses in the city, is so small that it will not pay for the trouble of collecting, though, if suffered to remain, this small quantity may become a very great nuisance.”

Such were the views I presented to your Board in 1857, in relation to the swill nuisance, and the experience of nine years since that time, with the complaints which are daily brought to my notice, fully confirm their correctness.

The remedies which I proposed at that time were as follows; and with some slight modifications, I can propose nothing better at this time:

“1. Define the meaning of the words ‘swill,’ and ‘house offal.’

“2. Require all the swill and house offal, from every house, to be removed out of the city, daily, during the months of June, July, August and September; tri-weekly during the months of April, May and October; and semi-weekly during the months of November, December, January, February and March.

“3. Require every house-keeper to place the swill and house offal in a suitable vessel, and in a convenient place for removal.

“4. Authorize the employment, by the city, under the control of the Board of Health, of a sufficient number of horses, water-tight covered carts, and drivers, to remove all the swill and house offal; the carts to be plainly marked ‘city swill

carts;’ to give notice of their approach by horns or bells; and the drivers to be under obligation to visit every house in their district and faithfully to remove the swill.

“5. Authorize the sale of the swill and house offal, by the city, to be delivered on scows or at some convenient depot; the same to be removed, daily, to a sufficient distance beyond the city limits.

“6. Authorize the granting of licenses to other persons to remove the swill and house offal from those houses, the occupants of which shall make a request to that effect, in writing, and provided persons so licensed shall give bonds to remove the swill as frequently as the city carts; to remove it for one year, at least; and to remove it at least one mile beyond the city limits; and provided they shall engage not to keep any swine within that distance of the city; and provided they shall remove the swill in water-tight covered carts, the carts to be marked ‘private swill carts,’ with the owner’s name, in plain letters.

“7. Strictly forbid any person from removing swill, without a license, or in any manner, excepting in water-tight covered carts; and particularly forbid the collection of swill by women and children.

“Such are a few of the provisions of an ordinance which, it seems to me, would be effectual to accomplish the removal of the swill and house offal from the city, and to avoid the difficulties which exist under the present regulations.

“An ordinance, somewhat similar to the above, has been in force in the city of Baltimore for three or four years, and that city has enjoyed some remarkable exemptions from epidemics, which seem to show that its sanitary regulations are worthy of imitation. In Baltimore, the ‘city garbage carts’ visit ‘every street, lane and alley, not less than three times a week, on alternate days, from the first day of November until the first day of May; and daily, (Sundays excepted,) from the first day of May until the first day of November, for the removal of offal and coal ashes from the dwellings and other places, within the several districts of the city.’

Whether the garbage is all removed in Baltimore, under this arrangement, I know not; but we may be certain that no more

is removed than ought to be. During the year 1854, in that city, 38,420 loads of garbage, including coal ashes, were removed by the city carts. The average weight per load was 2036 pounds; the average quantity to each house in the city was 2263 pounds; and the average cost was 44 cents per load, or 2.3 cents per 100 pounds. In 1856, in the same city, 52,476 loads were removed, at an expense of 43.7 cents per load. The population of Baltimore is about four times that of Providence. With regard to the system in operation in Baltimore, the reports of the Board of Health of that city say:

“So far as relates to the cleaning of streets and the removal of garbage, we have been peculiarly fortunate in securing a system which time and experience has demonstrated to be ample in its comprehension, and eminently useful in its results. The present system has proved abundantly sufficient for all street sanitary purposes.”

This plan would undoubtedly be effectual, and my opinion now is what it was nine years since, that no other plan will give satisfaction, and accomplish the object desired, namely, the removal of all the swill and offal from the city. *

But this plan involves considerable expense, and requires time to put it in operation. I would again recommend the subject to your consideration, and would suggest that a committee be appointed to examine it, and report such action as may be deemed advisable in the future.

For the exigencies of the present moment we must depend upon our present system, with such improvements as we may be able to obtain. In connection with the Chief of Police, I have already taken measures to secure a more effectual compliance with the arrangements and regulations now existing, and think it will be secured.

The present contractors have engaged to do the work faithfully, and in accordance with the stringent rules adopted by your Board, November 2, 1857.* If their agreement is not fulfilled, we have the power to annul the contracts and give them to other persons. Their contracts will expire December 31, 1866.

*See page 13.

As I have already said, I think the present excitement upon the subject, among the people, arises more from increased interest in the removal of filth than from any unusual neglect on the part of the swill contractors.

A few persons, and with good reasons, make bitter complaints that their swill is not removed, and the number of complaints is much greater than it should be; but it should be remembered that the persons who do not make any complaint, and are supposed to be satisfied, can be counted by hundreds to one of those who have cause for complaint.

The greater portion of the complaints come from two wards of the city and from part of another ward, and there is good reason for them; but in the rest of the city there is very little complaint.

No one can appreciate the importance of having the swill removed promptly from the city more than I do, and whatever can be done to accomplish this object, by law or otherwise, will most certainly be done.

SLAUGHTER HOUSE.

We have but one slaughter house within the limits of the city. That is almost surrounded with dwelling houses, and is a most serious, dangerous and offensive nuisance to a large number of people. It is not necessary to describe the causes which render slaughter houses at all times, and under all circumstances, nuisances in the compact portions of any city. It is sufficient to say that such locations for slaughter houses are universally condemned, and the authorities of all our cities are taking measures to remove them.

From two examinations that I have made of the slaughter house in this city, it is my opinion that, owing to local circumstances and the want of an abundance of water, it is not kept in as good order as slaughter houses in some other cities. At any rate, when I have seen it, it has been very offensive to the sight and to the senses. I consider it a serious nuisance, dangerous to health, and a great and constant annoyance to the neighborhood.

I would recommend that the subject be referred to the City Solicitor, with instructions to commence immediately such legal measures as may be necessary to remove the nuisance from the city, in the speediest manner possible.

THE STREETS.

Under the effects of the hot sun of the last few days, the paved streets in the central portions of the city are fast becoming as offensive and dangerous to health as they were last summer. Every one knows that in streets which are used so much, large quantities of horse manure and other filth must accumulate every day, and common sense shows that the moistening of this filth daily, by street watering, in hot weather, must promote rapid decomposition and the production of volumes of impure air which is dangerous to health.

If not watered, the filth would soon become perfectly desiccated, and though the dust might be a great annoyance, it would be far less injurious to health than the impure air which arises from its decomposition.

It has become evident that the streets will not be thoroughly swept by private enterprise, and in my opinion, a proper regard for the public health demands that your Board should either forbid entirely the watering of the streets, or else provide that the principal streets should be thoroughly swept, every day, at the expense of the city.

SANITARY PRECAUTIONS.

The increase of cases of cholera in New York, and some slight indications of choleraic influence in this and other cities, call upon us to be sure that every needed precaution is made to meet the disease.

If we should have a case of cholera, I should consider it necessary to take active and prompt measures to cleanse and disinfect the house and premises where it was found. An increase of cases would require additional measures for cleansing and additional expense for disinfectants. If the indications of

sickness should increase, I should consider it the duty of the city to use disinfectants for some few of the street sewers, at the openings of which, though very offensive, I am sorry to say no traps have been provided, though I have often called attention to the danger, and though the traps have twice been ordered to be constructed by formal vote of your Board, and of the City Council.

To be provided for exigencies which may occur, I would ask that I may be authorized to take such measures as may be necessary for cleansing houses, purchasing disinfectants, &c., at the expense of the city. So far as possible, everything will be done at the expense of the owners or occupants of estates; but cases may probably occur when no delay can be had, and the most immediate action will be necessary. I suppose this may be done under the regular appropriation for the Health Department.

MEDICINES FOR THE POOR.

In cases of cholera, or of the preliminary diarrhoea which usually precedes cholera, it is of the utmost importance that medical attendance and medicine should be obtained immediately. In fact, the only hope of relief depends upon immediate action.

Many of the class of persons which is likely to suffer most from the cholera, are unable to obtain the proper medicines, or may, on account of the expense, be inclined to delay obtaining them. Besides this, there is not sufficient provision in this city for obtaining medicines promptly at any hour of the night. Provision should be made so that any person can obtain medicine promptly at any hour, and if they are unable to pay for it, they should be able to get it on recommendation of any physician.

It is probable that very few persons would avail themselves of this mode of obtaining the medicine, and that the expense of making such provision would be very small.

I would recommend that a committee be appointed to ascertain what provision can be made for having one or two apothecary's shops on each side of the river kept open at all hours, and

for furnishing medicine to the poor gratis. Perhaps some arrangement can be made for this object with the Providence Dispensary.

OTHER PREPARATIONS.

Some months since I recommended that application be made to the Secretary of War for permission to use, if necessary, the barracks on the Cove lands. I understand that nothing has been done, and that the buildings are to be sold, at auction, on Thursday next.

The exigency may occur when it would be of very great importance to use some of those buildings for hospital purposes, or for the temporary accommodation of families which it may be necessary to remove from infected localities.

The buildings cannot be sold for more than their value as old lumber, and I would suggest that a committee be authorized to examine them, and if they thought proper, to purchase some of them for the city.

I do not make these recommendations because there is anything unusual or alarming in the present indications in relation to the cholera. The city generally continues remarkably healthy for the season, and so far as I can judge, the prospects do not indicate the probability of any severe epidemic.

But it is wise to be prepared for any exigency; for when such exigency does occur it is then too late to make the necessary preparations for it.

Respectfully,

EDWIN M. SNOW, M. D.,

Superintendent of Health.

SWILL AND HOUSE OFFAL.

In Board of Aldermen, November 2, 1857, the following rules and regulations in relation to the removal of swill and house offal were adopted, and are still in force :

First. All swill and house offal shall be removed from each house in the city every day during the months of June, July, August, September and October, three times each week during the months of April and May, and twice each week during the months of November, December, January, February and March.

Second. All swill and house offal shall be collected and removed from the city in water-tight covered carts or wagons, drawn by one or more horses, and no cart or wagon shall be used for collecting or removing swill and house offal until the same shall have been examined and approved by the City Marshal. Every cart or wagon used for collecting and removing swill and house offal shall be plainly marked "Swill Cart," and with the name of the owner and such other marks as shall be required by the Superintendent of Health.

Third. All swill and house offal collected by the city shall be removed at least half a mile beyond the limits of the city, and no license shall be granted to any person to collect swill and house offal in the city, unless he shall give sufficient bonds that he will not keep any swine within half a mile of the city limits.

Fourth. The covers of all carts or wagons used for collecting swill and house offal in the city, shall be kept tightly closed while they are being driven through the streets.

Fifth. No license shall be granted to any person to collect and remove swill and house offal, unless such person shall give good and sufficient bonds to remove said swill and house offal strictly in accordance with the above rules and regulations.

