HIDDEN HISTORY of LEWES

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erican presence. A public beach, a station for the bay pilots, the facilities he Lewes-Cape May Ferry and modern housing now line the bayfront. he National Harbor of Refuge and Delaware Breakwater Historic District been established to include the stone barriers and their lighthouses built e nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since most of the stonework dden underwater, their appearance belies the enormous amount of that went into the construction of what was one of the largest projects ertaken by the federal government.

Chapter 5

At the Cape

Fear of the Pox

In 1808, a ship sailed into Lewes Harbor carrying a sick sailor, suffering from chills, fever, nausea, aches and other flu-like symptoms. The sick seaman was brought ashore and treated, but he did not improve. The sailor developed a rash, and the worst fears of those attending the sick man were realized. The sailor had smallpox. An estimated 40 percent of those who contracted smallpox died, and those who recovered were left with numerous small scars that gave the disease its name.

In the early nineteenth century, the doctors of Lewes did not understand what caused smallpox, but they did know of a way to keep the disease from spreading. At that time, Delaware doctors prevented the spread of smallpox by inoculating healthy people with fluids drawn from an infected person. In most cases, the inoculated person contracted only a mild form of the disease from which he or she would recover. After those who had been inoculated were restored to health, they were immune to smallpox. Some people died from the smallpox inoculation, but the death rate was much lower than contracting the disease "the natural way."

In 1808, a reported five hundred people were vaccinated in Lewes, and only one person, Hanna Holland, who had vaccinated herself, contracted the disease. In most cases, however, the most effective means of preventing the spread of contagious diseases continued to be isolating the sick from the general population.

Nearly eight decades later, a small boat carrying James Atwald landed at ewes, and the well-dressed Englishman picked up his luggage and quietly ade his way into town. Avoiding as many of the town's residents as well ; he could, Atwald, who walked with a slightly limp, took a room at a oardinghouse. When he arrived in Lewes in February 1883, the unusually otchy colors of his skin blended together until his flesh appeared variegated ith silver streaks running through it. The visible lumps on the Englishman's in did not appear to give him any pain or inconvenience, but whenever twald rubbed his hands together, he created a small cloud of fine, bran-like ust. The Englishman's peculiar appearance fed rumors that he was afflicted ith a serious disease, and when confronted by the people of Lewes, Atwald eely admitted that he had leprosy.

From ancient times, leprosy was misunderstood and feared. With no nown cure, the stigmatized patients who contracted the disease were usually tracized and forced to live in separate "leper" colonies. Before arriving Lewes, Atwald believed he contracted the disease in Madagascar; and hen he first realized that he had leprosy, he was so despondent that he nsidered committing suicide. Believing that colder weather mitigated the fects of the disease, Atwald decided to go to Canada, but when the captain the ship on which he was traveling discovered his reclusive passenger ad leprosy, he put Atwald ashore at Lewes, where the people fell back on biblical treatment of those inflicted with leprosy. Atwald was summarily anished from the town. According to the *New York Times*, "The extravagant ories that went rapidly from mouth to mouth caused such agitation that a ecial meeting of the town council was decided upon to consider ways and eans to rid the community of the dangerous patient."

Two years after Atwald arrived in Lewes, the Delaware Breakwater uarantine station was established at Cape Henlopen to intercept any nmigrant bound for Philadelphia who showed symptoms of an infectious sease. During the nineteenth century, immigrant ships were often floating estholes, and seasoned sailors could identify immigrant ships by their smell. t first, the station's hospital facilities were a modest six beds and a few orkrooms, but eventually, the installation spread over forty-one acres on the unes of the cape. Dr. William P. Orr, a native of Lewes and the assistant cting surgeon in the Marine Hospital Service, served as the Breakwater ospital's first director. (Dr. Orr's great-great-grandfather was the William rr who purchased some of Captain's Kidd's loot. William Penn had ecreed that Orr be banished from the coastal area, but he remained in ewes, and the family became a mainstay of the community.) In *A Small-*

Town Boyhood in the First State, Dr. Orr's son, Robert, recalled his father's work at the quarantine station:

> *His job was to check for contagion on incoming foreign ships which had to be cleared to Philadelphia. The crew were examined on their ships for contagious diseases and, if contagion was found, the crew members were sent ashore for treatment at the Quarantine Station. The station was located near where the public fishing pier now is. The Station boasted a full line of services including hospital, graveyard, crematoriums, etc.*

According to Robert, it was customary for the captain to give his father a gift for his work: "Dad refused alcoholic gifts; however, he once accepted a parrot, unaware that it had been exposed to the salty language of this three-masted schooner's crew. Upon being introduced to our household for several days, my mother demanded that this bird with such colorful language be expelled at once."

For the first ten years after the hospital opened in 1885, the facility operated on a seasonal basis. At that time, many sailing ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean avoided the stormy winter season. By 1895, nearly all sailing ships had been displaced by steamships, and the quarantine station was kept open all year. Immigrants who were suspected of carrying a contagious disease could be quarantined at the station for as little as ten days or as long as two months. With the number of immigrants flooding to America increasing every year, the hospital was expanded to accommodate the large number of travelers who failed the health inspection. A series of barracks buildings were constructed that could sleep 1,500 steerage-class passengers. A separate building that could house 150 passengers was built for the well heeled and healthier cabin-class travelers.

In addition to the accommodations for the quarantined passengers, the station contained a bathhouse, surgeons' quarters, a disinfecting house and several support buildings. In 1915, the Italian steamer *Verona* reached Cape Henlopen with several hundred immigrants. Many of the immigrants were eager to reach Philadelphia, where they hoped to spend Easter with friends and relatives. Their trip, however, was sidetracked. A suspected case of smallpox was reported aboard the *Verona*, and the immigrants were duly marched to the quarantine station for an extended stay.

A group of immigrants, tired of the delay, devised a plan to break out from the station. Two hundred immigrants forced their way through the wire fence that enclosed the grounds and brushed past the guards who were

ully unprepared for such a mass exodus. The immigrants headed for the ad station, three miles away. At the station, the crowd demanded tickets hiladelphia, but the agent, brandishing a pistol, refused to sell them. standoff at the railroad station ended when the revenue cutter *Onondaga* ed with a detachment of fifty marines with rifles and fixed bayonets. unarmed immigrants abruptly retreated to the friendlier confines of the antine station. The next day, a steamer arrived to take the immigrants iladelphia, and the great escape came to a happy conclusion.

orld War I curtailed the flow of immigrants across the Atlantic, and the United States entered the war in 1917, the navy took over the ds of the quarantine station. After the war ended, legislation was passed estricted the number of immigrants allowed into the United States, he quarantine station, which had processed 200,000 immigrants, was nger needed. A few years later, the station was abandoned.

Case of the Stinking Fish

early seventeenth century, the sight of several whales near the mouth Delaware Bay convinced the Dutch leaders of the ill-fated Swanendael y that a whale station on Cape Henlopen would be profitable. The settlers, however, found only a single carcass of a dead whale that had d onto the beach. After the destruction of Swanendael, the residents wes had little interest in hunting the great beasts of the ocean, but in neteenth century, they began to pursue a much smaller and plentiful ne lowly menhaden.

1607, Captain John Smith had encountered a school of menhaden so rous that he tried to catch them with a frying pan. Several hundred and menhaden traveled in schools that were so large that they were imes mistaken for small islands, but for years, the oily and bony fish gnored. The development of mechanized presses, however, provided onomical method for extracting oil from the fish. One thousand aden fielded about fourteen gallons of oil that was used in lamps, paint her products.

owing the Civil War, S.S. Brown & Company and the Luce Brothers d fish-processing factories on the beach between Lewes and Cape pen, and the town became the homeport for a small fleet of fishing . These small boats were not smart-looking yachts, but they were

Menhaden fishing boats, large and small, moored at a pier on Lewes Beach. *Courtesy of the Delaware Public Archives.*

among the fastest sailing crafts on the water. Most vessels in the menhaden fleet were about fifty feet long and eighteen feet wide. These durable boats carried a crew of eight to ten men who sailed from Lewes in fair and foul weather. The menhaden fishermen used seines that were seven hundred feet long and up to one hundred feet deep to corral their catch, which could amount to seventeen tons in a single boat.

After the fish were muscled aboard, the boats set sail for the Lewes fish factories, where the fish were boiled in large tanks of water. The water was then removed, and a hydraulic press was used to extract the oil and water from the fish. The water containing the oil extracted from the fish was collected in tanks, where the oil rose to the surface and could be skimmed off. Some of the oil, however, remained in the water; and this water was dumped into Delaware Bay.

The fermenting fish scraps provided food for masses of maggots that produced swarms of flies and an odor that was overpowering. A nineteenth-century observer remarked, "The fetid odors aris[es] from these works and permeat[e] the atmosphere for miles in their vicinity, making them a nuisance, so far as odor is concerned, to their neighborhoods." According to John A. Clampitt, the keeper of the Lewes Life-Saving Station, which was