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Dr. James Latham (c. 1734-1799): Pioneer inoculator in Canada

Dr. James Latham, British military surgeon and inoculator, was the first known person to have practised inoculation for smallpox in Canada. He came to Canada with his regiment in July 1768¹ and undertook inoculation in Quebec and Montreal in the years 1768-70 and again in 1786. His efforts were recorded in the Quebec Gazette² and have been liberally quoted by various authorities on the history of medicine in Canada.³ But to date little has been known of his life or subsequent career. Recent work has re-assessed the role of inoculation in reducing the incidence of smallpox in the 18th century.⁴ In an age where smallpox was considerable inevitable, inoculation with live smallpox matter could reduce the mortality from the disease from one in six deaths from natural smallpox to one in fifty deaths for those inoculated.⁵

Latham's early efforts to combat smallpox in the province of Quebec have earned him a place as pioneer in medicine in Canada. It is the intention of this short biography to examine the broader content of his career as an inoculator and his years in North America.

James Latham was probably born in England, but nothing is known of his early life⁶ or his early preparation for the practice of medicine. He joined the 8th (or King's) Regiment of Foot as surgeon's mate in 1756 and served twelve years in Great Britain and on the continent, three years of these in Germany.⁷ He was promoted to surgeon in 1767 and received his commission July 15.⁸ Before coming to Canada he had prepared himself as an inoculator, learning his skills from the Sutton

family, prominent English inoculators.⁹ Robert and Daniel Sutton had refined the technique of inoculation to produce in the patient as mild a reaction as possible. By keeping their method and medicines secret, except from those designated as "partners", to whom their procedure was revealed for a fee, they had built up a lucrative practice.¹⁰ Latham claimed to be the sole representative of the Suttons "in all America."¹¹ At the time of his arrival in Quebec he was already married, father of one daughter; a second daughter was born later that year.¹²

Latham was undoubtedly motivated in his practice of inoculation by the prospect of augmenting his pay as surgeon. He was encouraged in this by the British army, which paid one guinea for each soldier inoculated outside of the barracks.¹³ The first advertisement for Latham's services as inoculator appeared in the Quebec Gazette 15 September 1768, in which he offered his services as an accoucheur as well as an inoculator. In September and October 1768 he inoculated several groups of soldiers,¹⁴ and a few weeks later his eldest daughter, a child of two or three years of age. By means of these examples and regular advertisements in the Gazette he was able to build up a small clientele. Although his fee for inoculation was not stated, he did offer to inoculate free of charge all those unable to afford the procedure.¹⁵ By the following spring he had inoculated 303 persons.¹⁶ Sufficient interest in his progress had been aroused to enable him to publish two pamphlets for the use of those undergoing inoculation: Regiments for Children, in English, and Regiments for Adults, translated into French.¹⁷

In July 1769 he removed to Montreal, where an epidemic of smallpox the following autumn increased the demand for his services.¹⁸ As a result, he opened an inoculation house so that those who wished could remain under his care while undergoing inoculation.¹⁹ His notice in

the Gazette of 16 November 1769 stated that 200 persons had been recently inoculated without one loss of life. By the summer of 1770, when he moved on to New York, he was said to have inoculated 1250 persons in Canada.²⁰

In New York, he again set up inoculation apartments. His charge was now advertised as $\text{£ } 3/4$ New York Currency.²¹ As in Quebec, the fee could be adjusted to the financial circumstances of the patient. He was joined in New York by another Suttonian Mr. Shuttleworth, brother-in-law to Mr. Sutton. Shuttleworth was authorized to inoculate in all parts of America south of Philadelphia; Latham continued to be the sole representative north of that city.²²

Latham's practice prospered. By 1773 he was operating a chain of inoculation hospitals in New York province, Connecticut and Massachusetts, and had taken an "associate" in each of seven towns.²³ In addition, Hammond Beaumont, surgeon to the 26th Regiment of Foot, was named "Sutton and Latham's principal partner" in Canada.²⁴ Latham himself had moved out of the city and was living on a farm in Livingston Manor some one hundred miles north of New York.²⁵ That he profited from the system of associates is attested by a contemporary, who stated that Latham "prepared and furnished" all medicines used by his partners, that they agreed to pay over to him one half of all monies received to the amount of $\text{£ } 300$, and after that, one third of all further monies "from the business." At the same time, those taken as partners were not to attempt to discover the composition of the medications used.²⁶

As private inoculation hospitals multiplied throughout New England, opposition to their presence arose in some towns. This was particularly noticeable in time of epidemic, when inoculation was blamed for the spread of smallpox.²⁷ Latham was involved in one such incident in 1774. In January of that year, angry citizens of Marblehead, Mass., burned their inoculation hospital to the ground. This action rebounded

against Latham, who was carrying out inoculation in nearby Salem. Salem citizens forced the closure of their own hospital in early March, and Dr. Latham was called before subscribers to defend his practice.²⁸ Strong criticism appeared in the local press, not only of his performance as an inoculator, but also of the Suttonian method in general: its evident use of mercurials, its policy of secrecy, and its binding financial obligations on those taken as partners.

The outbreak of the Revolution the following year disrupted to an extent the Suttonian network, but it also extended the practice of inoculation as new recruits in both the American and British armies were routinely subjected to the procedure. "Latham, N.Y." is listed as having "attended soldiers" during this period.²⁹ The Revolution, however, introduced ideological conflict for Latham, whose residence in Livingston Manor brought him in contact with Robert R. Livingston and other large landowners. They themselves were divided on the path the Revolution should take.³⁰ Latham was evidently torn between his loyalty to Britain and his desire to protect his investment in the community in which he had become established. He resigned his commission "before August 1775,"³¹ but whether this was to avoid entering British service, as Robert Livingston later stated,³² or because of the "great and flattering prospect of succeeding in his profession," as Latham maintained,³³ is a matter of judgement.

Latham continued to show ambivalence throughout the revolutionary period. As his income from inoculation decreased, he was forced to find other means of augmenting it. An attempt to provide flour for the use of "His Majesty's Army from Canada" led to its confiscation and a personal loss for Latham of £1200.³⁴ Suspected of treason, he sought the support of Livingston who disclaimed knowledge of Latham's "political character" but vouched for him as an "honest man and gentlemen," one who had never shown "prejudice" towards the American cause.³⁵ Subsequent attempts to recoup his loss by shipping merchandise from

from New York to Philadelphia -- for which purpose he obtained a permit from the British authorities to "pass and re-pass the lines" -- resulted by mid-1782 in a further debt of £1000.³⁶ Before this loss could be rectified, peace was declared. Forced now to take a stand, Latham presented a memorial to Sir Guy Carleton, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, 13 May 1783. In this he outlined the dilemma in which he found himself, declaring his consistent loyalty to the Crown, his rejection of all efforts on the part of "individuals in power" to enlist him in the rebel cause, and praying for such relief as "might be thought proper."³⁷

The immediate outcome of his petition to Carleton is not known. In fact, his movements over the next few years are difficult to establish. That he re-joined the British army is evident, but exactly when is not clear. In August 1783 he negotiated a lease for his farm in Livingston Manor, to run "for and during the natural lives" of Wilhelmina Latham, and his sons James Latham and Livingston John Latham.³⁸ His name is recorded in various account books and ledgers for Livingston Manor from 1776 until January 1787.³⁹ In 1786 he returned briefly to Canada, for his advertisement as an inoculator appeared at intervals in the Quebec Gazette from 28 September to 30 November. Described as "Late Surgeon to the King's Regiment of Foot," he had arrived in Montreal "from New York" with the intention of taking up residence. Yet in 1788 his name is entered once more as doctor on Livingston Manor.⁴⁰ It is not until 1790 that relevant documents confirm his presence in the British army. On 4 March 1790, James Latham relieved Dr. James Connor as surgeon to the garrison in Kingston, in the Province of Quebec, soon to be Upper Canada.⁴¹ Whatever family crisis transpired in the years between 1783 and 1790 is not known. Whether Latham's wife remained in New York, or whether she had died before he returned to Canada has not been determined. What is certain is that he was alone in Kingston and that his children remained behind in the general area of Livingston

Manor.⁴²

In Kingston, Latham set about once more to establish himself. As well as his duties in the garrison, he was responsible for the medical supervision of the Indians and of the Naval Department.⁴³ He was also required at times to give his professional opinion on medical matters in cases appearing before the Court of Common Pleas,⁴⁴ or sit as member of a Board of Survey with other officers of the garrison.⁴⁵ Within the community, he was one of the original benefactors of the new English church, later St. George's Cathedral.⁴⁶ In 1790 and 1795 he applied for land according to his rank as surgeon and was later granted 2000 acres.⁴⁷ In 1795 he also applied for and was recommended to receive a town lot.⁴⁸

Just how much Latham carried out the practice of inoculation in Kingston has not been ascertained. Inoculation had reached its peak in colonial America and Canada during the American Revolutionary war and gradually declined as major smallpox epidemics became less frequent. Military authorities restricted its use to time of epidemic, and even then, with reservations.⁴⁹ Latham may well have practised privately, yet despite recurrent outbreaks of smallpox in the area, only one record has been found of his fulfilling his former role as inoculator. And in this instance he was ultimately to be disappointed. During a smallpox epidemic in the winter of 1796-7 large numbers of Indians were expected to come to the post to be inoculated.⁵⁰ Latham received special orders from Dr. Mervin Nooth, Physicians to the Forces in Quebec, to prepare for their reception;⁵¹ yet by mid-January none had appeared.⁵² Although Mohawk Indians at Burlington Bay and Mississauga Indians at York were inoculated the following spring,⁵³ there is no clear evidence that any were inoculated at Kingston. Latham died suddenly 28 January 1799⁵⁴ and was buried from the parish church in Kingston.⁵⁵

James Latham was representative of many of his contemporary aries

whose lives were disrupted by the American Revolution. Although he played a role in the established community in his new home, financial losses sustained in America were never recovered; nor did he regain his earlier position of relative prestige. Cut off from his family, no longer in demand as an inoculator, he finished his days in a pioneer settlement in the routine role of surgeon to the garrison. His death occurred on the eve of the widespread dissemination of the new "inoculation" with cowpox.⁵⁶

As an inoculator, Latham was following a trend already established in England and America. His personal contribution to the reduction of the incidence of smallpox cannot be measured. Yet despite his limited practice in Canada and his frankly materialistic approach to his craft, nevertheless he attained recognition in both colonial America and Canada as a pioneer in his field.

NOTES

1. Quebec Gazette, 21 July, 15 September 1768.
2. Ibid., passim, 15 September 1768-13 August 1770; 28 September-30 November 1786.
3. John J. Heagerty, Four Centuries of Medical History in Canada, 2 vols. (Toronto 1928), Vol. I, 79-81; Maude E. Abbot, History of Medicine in the Province of Quebec (Montreal 1931), 41-42; Adhern, Michael Joseph, Notes pour servir à l'histoire de la médecine dans le Bas-Canada depuis la fondation de Québec jusqu'au commencement du XIXe siècle (Québec 1923), 75, 358-62.
4. Genevieve Miller, The Adoption of Inoculation for Smallpox in England and France (Philadelphia 1957); Peter Razzell, The Conquest of Smallpox (Firle, Sussex 1977).

5. Ibid., 140-58; Miller, Adoption of Inoculation, 117-18, 121-2.
6. Whether he was connected in any way with the two prominent medical families of the same name in Kent and Cheshire is not known. See Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. IX, 605-8. There is no evidence that Latham maintained contact with Britain during his years in America.
7. Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Upper Canada Land Papers, RG1, L1, Vol. 283, Petition L1/41, Memorial of James Latham to His Excellency, John Graves Simcoe, Kingston, 4 August 1795. (PAC Reel C-2124).
8. William Johnston, Roll of Commissioned Officers in the Medical Services of the British Army ... 1727-1898 (Aberdeen 1927), #749.
9. Quebec Gazette, 15 September 1768.
10. The Suttons and their method are discussed at length in Razzell, Conquest of Smallpox, 9-10, 62-67 and passim. Latham had probably paid Sutton's price of 50-100 for his "partnership" Ibid., 66. See also Charles Creighton, A History of Epidemics in Britain, 2 vols. 2nd ed. (London 1965), Vol. II, 498-9. Daniel Sutton was said to have made 2000 guineas in 1764 and 6300 in 1765.
11. Quebec Gazette, 13 April 1769.
12. Ibid., 3 November 1768; PAC, MG8, a24, microfilm of the Registers of the Holy Trinity Cathedral, Quebec, Vol. 10, 3, Baptism of Rebecca, daughter of James Latham, 8 October 1768. (PAC Reel C. 2897).
13. Lt. Gen. Sir Neil Cantlie, A History of the Army Medical Department (Edinburgh and London 1974), 2 Vols. Vol I, 281.
14. Quebec Gazette, 15 September, 29 September, 3 November 1768.
15. Ibid., 15 September 1768.
16. Ibid., 2 May 1769.
17. 400 copies in English were printed, 200 copies in French. These sold for 1 and 15/ respectively. No known copies survive. Printed at Quebec for J. Latham by Brown and Gilmore, 15 April 1769; in Marie Tremaine, A Bibliography of Canadian Imprints, 1751-1800 (Toronto 1952), 64.
18. Quebec Gazette, 11 July 1769 and passim.

19. Ibid., 26 October 1769. Private inoculation hospitals became common in England and America in the latter half of the century. Miller, Adoption of Inoculation, 165-8.
20. New York Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, 13 August 1770, p.3. (National Library Microprint).
21. Ibid., 7 January 1771. This advertisement is reproduced in John Duffy, Epidemics in Colonial America (Port Washington, N.Y. 1953), 41-2 and wrongly dated 7 January 1776.
22. New York Gazette, 18 February 1771, p.3.
23. These were: Orangetown, Albany, Schenectady, Kinderhook and Red Hook, all in New York province; Salisbury, Conn.; and Worcester, Mass. Kenneth Scott, Rivington's New York newspaper, Excerpts 1773, p. 47, 64. (Courtesy New York Public Library.) For Latham's activities as an inoculator during this period see Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776 (New York 1955), 328.
24. Rivington p. 47; Quebec Gazette, 30 September 1773. Beaumont was the author of "Treatise on Inoculation", published by Subscription, Rivington Press. N.Y. Gazette, 25 March 1771, p.1.
25. Rivington, p.47.
26. Mss. of John W. Stiles, in Lincoln's History of Worcester (courtesy American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.).
27. Threats to demolish private inoculation hospitals occurred frequently in both England and America. Miller, Adoption of Inoculation, 167-8.
28. Joseph B. Felt, Annals of Salem, Vol. II, 431-5 (courtesy Salem Public Library); The Essex Gazette, Salem, Mass., March 1774 (courtesy American Antiquarian Society).
29. Louis C. Duncan, Medical Men in the American Revolution, 1775-1783 (Pennsylvania, Medical Field Service School 1931), 400.
30. Livingston Manor provided a haven in the early years of the Revolution for those not yet committed to either side. L.F.S. Upton, The Loyal Whig, William Smith of New York and Quebec (Toronto 1969), 107-19.
31. Johnston, Roll of Commissioned Officers, #749.

32. New York Historical Society, R. R. Livingston Papers, Robert R. Livingston to Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, 13 September 1778. (Reader-Printer copy, courtesy New York Historical Society.)
- 33 & 34. British Headquarters Papers, PAC, MG23, B1, #7679, Memorial of Mr. Latham - Late Surgeon to the King's (or 8th) Reg't of Foot to His Excellency Sir Guy Carleton, 13 May 1793. (PAC Reel M-362).
35. Livingston to Van Rensselaer, 13 September 1778.
- 36 & 37. Memorial of Mr. Latham to Sir Guy Carleton, 13 May 1783.
38. New York Historical Society, Duane Papers, Vol. 6 #50, James Latham to James Duane, Manor Livingston, 18 August 1783, (Reader-Printer copy; courtesy New York Historical Society). Neither daughters were mentioned; it is highly probably that Wilhelmina Latham was James Latham's wife.
- 39 & 40. These references were located by the Columbia County Historical Society, Kinderhook, N.Y. Latham's name appears as follows: John Curry's Mill, 1781-18 January 1787; rent for farm, 1776-83 (originals of both in NYHS); tax list for 1779; doctor on the Manor, 1782 (original in Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.).
41. PAC, British Military and Naval Records, RG8, I, Vol. 511, 15, Captain Bunbury to Captain Le Maistre, 6 March 1790 (PAC Reel C-3044).
42. Marriage and baptismal records relating to Rebecca Latham and family, John L. Latham and family are found in the registers of the St. John Reformed Church, Upper Red Hook, N.Y. for the years 1799 and 1802. (Courtesy Columbia County Historical Society, Kinderhook, N.Y.).
43. PAC, RG8, I, Vol. 287-69, J.M. Nooth to J. Green. 24 June 1799.
44. W.R. Riddell, ed. "Records of the early Courts of Justice of Upper Canada", 14th Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1917 (Toronto 1918), 219,348.
45. PAC, RG8, I, Vol. 106,31, Proceedings of Board of Survey, Royal Canadian Volunteers, 17 May 1798 (PAC Reel C-2676).
46. A. H. Young, The Parish Register of Kingston, Upper Canada, 1783-1811 (Kingston 1921), 32. His contribution to the building fund was £ 2/6/8.

- 47 & 48. RG1, 11, Vol.306, Petition L misc./56, James Latham to Lord Dorchester, 7 April 1790 (PAC Reel C-2138); Ibid., Vol. 283, Petition L1/41, Latham to Simcoe, 1795 (PAC Reel C-2124); Ibid., Vol. 284, Petition L3/59, Latham to the Honorable Peter Russell, 17 November 1797 (PAC Reel C-2125).
49. Changing attitudes of military authorities towards inoculation in 18th century Canada is explored in B. Tunis, "Inoculation for Smallpox in the Province of Quebec, a Re-appraisal" (forthcoming). Fear of the spread of smallpox in the absence of epidemic was a major reason for caution.
50. RG8, I, Vol. 249,415, Nathaniel Lines to Joseph Chew, 17 October 1796, enclosure, in Joseph Chew to James Green, 3 November 1796 (PAC Reel C-2849).
51. Ibid. A note re. Latham's instructions is scrawled across the top of the letter. Specific orders were given that he was to receive no extra remuneration for the task.
52. Ibid., Vol. 250, 7, Hector McLean to Captain Green, 15 January 1797.
53. Ernest A. Cruikshank., ed., The Correspondence of the Honourable Peter Russell, 3 Vols. (Toronto 1932-36), I, 183.
54. RG8, I, Vol. 724, 21, Major Spencer to James Green, 6 February 1799 (PAC Reel C-3242); Ibid., 27 a-b, Inventory of stores belonging to the late Dr. James Latham.
55. The Incorporated Synod of the Diocese of Ontario, Register of St. George's Church, Kingston, Vol. 2-K-1, Burials, 1799, #108 (photostat, courtesy Registrar of the Diocese).
56. Edward Jenner's findings on vaccination with cowpox were published in 1798. The new method, once established in England, spread rapidly to other countries, reaching Canada in 1801. Jenner's discovery and the early introduction of vaccination to Newfoundland in 1798 is related in K. B. Roberts, Smallpox: an historic disease (St. John's 1979), 24-39.