

Smallpox: The American Fur Company Pox Outbreak of 1837-1838

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Introduction. Smallpox is a virus that raged its war upon the people of this world for millennia. Striking the Native American population in the late sixteenth century with the landing of Cortez, smallpox emerged again in the eighteenth century during the American Revolution. During the summer of 1837, smallpox struck the upper Missouri River region. The epidemic caused the near elimination of tribes such as the Assinneboins, Crees and Mandans. The events generated headlines for some major newspapers like *The Connecticut Courant*, *The Pennsylvania Freeman* and *The Waldo Patriot*. Newspapers printed a segment of the events that were occurring in the upper Missouri River region; however a record found in the journal of a clerk at Fort Clark named Francis Chardon, titled “the American Fur Company responsible for the smallpox devastation,” brought the Company's responsibility to light. Fur trading companies were based on goods and services provided by fur exports. The American Fur Company accomplished such goals by navigating the Missouri River with steamboats like the *St. Peter's*, which enabled them to provide such services at a greater speed. Through this rapid way of transportation, the American Fur Company became partly responsible for the alarming rate of Native American deaths due to smallpox, by spreading this disease throughout the upper Missouri River region.

The American Fur Company. The fur trading industry provided an opportunity for a plethora of people, and in doing so it opened the door for smallpox. Several fur companies made use of the Missouri River to provide vast amounts of goods to a variety of people, some of which included: the American Fur Company, the Missouri Fur Company, and Pratte & Chouteux Fur Company. These companies represented a major export industry that

shipped furs to places like Great Britain.¹ Although the American Fur Company was one among many that used the Missouri River, it was the only one considered responsible for the smallpox outbreak of 1837-1838.²

The American Fur Company was founded on April 6, 1808 by John Jacob Astor. Astor created the Company to compete with the Canadian challengers taking furs from the upper Missouri River region. These were the North West Company, Hudson Bay Company and the Michilimackinac Corporation. North West Company and Michilimackinac Corporation had impressive profits, which according to Upton Terrell amounted to \$1,200,000, and \$800,000 respectively. Astor was aware of the capital gains of these two companies, but he was particularly concerned about the capital they made from the United States; according to Upton Terrell “at least \$400,000 worth of furs were taken by the Canadians each season from the upper Mississippi and Missouri rivers.” The large demand for fur trade in the upper Missouri River region provided an opportunity for the American Fur Company to rise to an elite status among the fur trading companies.

The American Fur Company became the world’s largest fur company. In the time the Company was operational “the capital stock for the first two years would amount to one million dollars, afterward it... increased to two million.”³ From 1829 to 1831, the Company obtained over 700,000 furs, the majority of which were muskrats, raccoons, deer and beavers. By 1822 nearly 75 percent of all the fur exports from the United States were sent to Great Britain, and by the 1830s these exports were on a steady increase; “(the) depression of 1837-39 had little effect on the American fur trade” despite the smallpox epidemic of the upper Missouri River, and the overall value of these trades had become steady.⁴ One of the reasons for the Company's solidity was its use of steamboats. Keelboats had been the medium for ferrying goods and providing transportation up and down the Missouri River, until the steamboat came into use. The keelboat was described as a:

¹ Russell W. Fridley, Ed., Clayton, James L., “The Growth and Economic Significance of the American Fur Trade, 1790-1890,” *Aspects of the Fur trade* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967), 63.

² Annie Heloise Abel, Ed., *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark: 1834- 1839*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 319.

³ John Upton Terrell, *Fur by Astor*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 137, 143-44.

⁴ Russell W. Fridley, Ed., Clayton, James L., “The Growth and Economic Significance of the American Fur Trade, 1790-1890,” *Aspects of the Fur trade*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967), 63-67.

good sized boat, sixty to seventy feet long, and built on a regular model, with a keel running from bow to stern. It had fifteen to eighteen feet breadth of beam and three or four feet depth of hold.⁵

However, the keelboat was extremely difficult to manage as it took “twenty to forty men” to manage it upriver.⁶ The steamboat, on the other hand, “was found to accomplish a great saving over the cost of the keelboat,” and it was a great success for traveling upriver due to its “flat bottom.” Largely, the steamboat was unlike anything ever built at that time, since its main body was above the water except approximately three to four feet.⁷ Frequently steamboats were utilized by fur companies like the American Fur Company, which contracted the *St. Peter’s* in the summer of the epidemic. Thanks to this new technology, the Company was provided of transportation that was needed to carry goods and passengers over great distances in a relatively short amount of time. However, these advantages also proved to have brought the greatest demise for the Native American tribes of the upper Missouri River, during the epidemic of 1837-1838.

The Smallpox Virus. The study of smallpox shows that there are two different variations of the virus, named variola major and variola minor.⁸ Records indicate that variola virus was considered one of the largest viruses known. Its outer core, or “capsid,” bears a resemblance to a “diamond” like structure with a double stranded DNA, and its inner core resembles a “dumbbell.” Other sources suggest that variola contains approximately 200 genes.⁹ On the other hand, according to the Centers for Disease Control, Influenza A only has eleven genes.¹⁰ Smallpox is also considered to be very contagious. Frequently the most common form of contagion is through “droplet[s] infection by inhalation;” however another way of transmission could be through direct physical contact with someone who has smallpox. The most

⁵ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1903), 1, 102-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ Michael K. Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation of the Spread of Smallpox In the Northern Plains Utilizing concepts of Disease Ecology* (Nebraska: J&L Reprint Company, 1986), 24, 33.

⁹ Irwin W. Sherman, *Twelve Diseases that changed our world*, (Washington: ASM Press, 2007), 55.

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Avian Influenza (Flu),” *Transmission of Influenza A Viruses between Animals and People*, accessed online on April 15, 2009 at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/transmission.htm>.

visible signs of smallpox are its pustules, which once opened and in the proper atmosphere could harvest the disease for a period of a couple of months, and can potentially spread the disease further.¹¹

From a closer examination of the minor form of variola virus, we are able to see some interesting characteristic that differ from variola major. Variola minor has a rather low fatality rate of one to two percent, its functionality maintains a consistent pattern or time line that mimics variola major, and variola minor tends to contain an equivalent ratio of pustules to variola major, although “[t]he lesions are more superficial than in variola major.” Records indicate that the process of identifying variola minor from a “milder” form of variola major tends to be quite impossible. Variola major has a completely different zeal, since it “has an overall case fatality rate of 15 – 45%.” Thus far, scientists are aware of five different strands of variola major, which are the haemorrhagic, flat, ordinary, modified, and *sine eruption*.¹² From a thorough comparison between variola major and variola minor, scientists suggest that the main difference is their overall fatality rates.

Records show that smallpox raged upon the upper Missouri River region, but we are not sure about the form that the virus took when it devastated the Native Americans of the region. Nevertheless, we are aware of a frequent clinical symptomatic break down of the variola virus, since it is considered to have a standard pattern, which makes it easy to identify. Upon infection the host is not contagious for approximately thirteen days, but after this period, the infected becomes contagious until the smallpox cycle is nearly complete. Once the pustules or rashes begin to scab over, and fall off, the infected is no longer contagious. The entire cycle from the beginning to the end lasts about thirty two days in all.¹³

Examining the patterns of the smallpox virus helps further understand the timeline of the claims of infestation in the upper Missouri River region, as it shows us the time that passes from the disease entering the body to when the exterior symptoms become noticeable. The body shows no symptoms from the first to the eleventh day of the introduction of the disease; however the virus already begins to work itself into the respiratory tract from the first to the third day. From the third to the fifth day, the virus moves into the “lymph nodes and [enters] into the bloodstream,”¹⁴ when the disease is recorded to replicate itself

¹¹ Sherman, *Twelve Diseases*, 55-6.

¹² Sherman, *Twelve Diseases*, 56; Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 24-26, 33.

¹³ Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana the Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 19.

¹⁴ Sherman, *Twelve Diseases*, 56.

within the lymph system. This incubation period can range anywhere between twelve and fourteen days.¹⁵

After the incubation period, smallpox moves rapidly through its host. Symptoms begin to show around day twelve to fourteen, and the host experiences symptoms such as “headache, fever, chills, nausea, muscle ache, malaise and in worst cases convulsions.”¹⁶ Within few days after the incubation period, the host may suffer from a severe fever as the infected “often becomes delirious at this point and slips gradually into a stupor.” From day fifteen to day thirty rashes are very noticeable on the body, and the smallpox sores begin to develop inside the throat and mouth making it hard for the host to speak, eat, and drink. Within a few days the sores in the mouth and throat swell to a point of “suffocation,” with the face also swelling to enormous proportions, affecting the sight, and in “many cases” ending “in permanent blindness.” Sores spread over the face and forearms, and continue to appear on the host’s trunk, legs and back. On day fifteen the body begins to form “macules,” and from day sixteen to day eighteen “papules” begin to appear on the skin. Between days nineteen and twenty the “papules” transform into “vesicle[s],” which form into pustules between day twenty one and twenty four. From the twenty fifth to the thirtieth day “the pustules” eventually “erupt” and scab over; however these scabs are still capable of infecting others.¹⁷ Around days thirty one and thirty two, the scabs fall off and scarring begins, completing the entire cycle of the deadly variola virus. The shelf life for the virus is rather short, but variola is capable of spreading throughout a community like wildfire. By examining how variola works within the human body, a better understanding can be gained on how the disease traveled up the Missouri River and spread throughout the Native American populations.

St. Peter’s Journey Upriver. In 1835, a 119 ton side wheeler steamboat named *St. Peter* had just been created. The *St. Peter’s* was constructed in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, under the contract of the American Fur Company. It contained dual, high-pressure engines that successfully propelled its two side-paddles up the Missouri River, providing the needed capacities for the Company.¹⁸ By April of 1837, the *St. Peter’s* arrived at St. Louis, Missouri getting ready to make her way upriver to the far outpost of Fort Union, North

¹⁵ Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 19; Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 28, 33.

¹⁶ Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 19; Sherman, *Twelve Diseases*, 56.

¹⁷ Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 16-19; Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 28-30.

¹⁸ R.C. Roberson, *Rotting Faces: Smallpox and the American Indian*, (Idaho: Caxton Press, 2001), 9.

Dakota.¹⁹ During the summer of the same year, the steamboat was under the contract of the American Fur Company.

St. Peter's voyage began on April 17.²⁰ The steamboat's captain, Bernard Pratte Junior, stopped first at Fort Leavenworth.²¹ After a short rest the steamboat pressed onward to other ports upriver. Some records indicate that prior to the arrival at Fort Leavenworth, or shortly after departing, smallpox was identified onboard; however other records indicate that smallpox was acknowledged onboard around the Blacksnake region, north of Fort Leavenworth. Captain Pratte Jr. stopped the *St. Peter's* at Fort Leavenworth due to government mandates. At the time, Fort Leavenworth was utilized as a military check point. Due to liquor laws, in particular the Act of July 9, 1832, all liquor was banned from being sold or traded to Native Americans.²²

A timetable of the smallpox outbreak can be deduced by examining the personal accounts of Major Joseph Pilcher, an American Fur Company clerk stationed at Fort Clark named Frances A. Chardon, and others. Pilcher was an Indian Agent aboard the *St. Peter's*, and he witnessed several cases of smallpox among the passengers. In a letter to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, General William Clark, Pilcher explained the dire situation that could be upon them, stating:

I am not however without apprehensions of a failure owing to a circumstance which must prove fatal to many thousands of Indians along the line of the Missouri. The Smallpox broke out on board the Steamboat before she passed for Leavenworth.²³

He also indicated when the first sign of smallpox appeared onboard, and who had contracted it

the first indications of the disease appeared at or near Fort Leavenworth on a Mulato man attached to the boat, though it was not thought to be the Small pox at the time.

Pilcher's sense of urgency could be observed in another of his updates:

¹⁹ Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 33, 39.

²⁰ Roberson, *Rotting Faces*, 9.

²¹ Donald Jackson, *Voyages of the Steamboat Yellow Stone*, (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985), 68.

²² Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade*, 1, 355.

²³ The following quotes are from Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 33-68.

It is regretted that the apprehensions expressed in my letter of the 10th Ultimo respecting the Small pox have been partly realized [sic] & that from all the information I have been able to get, the disease is rapidly Spreading.

In a another letter written by Joshua Pilcher to General William Clark, Pilcher suggested that Captain Pratte was fully aware that smallpox virus was on board, but that he disregarded warnings in order to continue upriver.

a gentlemen of the Indian department [possibly himself] suggested to the Capt of the boat, that it would be well to put the man ashore and leave him- the Capt doubting the maldy [sic] and [the Captain] having use for the man declined doing so.²⁴

In a timely fashion, *The St. Peter's* arrived at the Council Bluff Agency on the Nebraska-Iowa border, on May 14, 1837.

At Council Bluff Agency, three Arikara women with children boarded the *St. Peter's*, on their way upriver to Fort Clark, North Dakota. The three Native American women soon experienced the next severe cases of smallpox. After this, nearly one month passed before *The St. Peter's* reached its next rest stop at the Sioux Agency, located near today's Sioux City, South Dakota. Records indicate the date of this arrival to be around June 5. By this point, the three Arikaras Indians who boarded the *St. Peter's* at Council Bluff Agency had advanced smallpox symptoms, having contracted the virus from a deckhand who had it since traveling through the Blacksnake region. Within a day's travel, the *St. Peter's* made its next stop at Fort Pierre, South Dakota. On June 10, Pilcher indicated a pessimistic attitude:

I am taking every possible precaution, and sending messages to all the other bands of Sioux admonishing them to remain out from the river and avoid the trading posts for the Summer.²⁵

He however did not loose hope, and expected his message to be communicated to the tribes from the Platte to the Yellow Stone. Chardon's journal provides an adequate account of the severity of this epidemic, and it also gives us important dates to establish the chronology of the disease. In his journal, Chardon wrote that *The St. Peter's* "hove in sight at 2 p.m." on Sunday, June 18.²⁶ According to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 65.

²⁶ Ibid, 118.

this timeframe, we can establish that it took twenty-six days before smallpox was shown to be abundant amongst the Mandan tribe.

Upon departing Fort Pierre, a gentleman named Jacob Halsey boarded the *St. Peter's*. Halsey was "formerly in charge of that [Fort Pierre] fur trading post." The *St. Peter's* continued its course upriver to the next check point, Fort Clark, North Dakota, arriving on June 19. At this point the three Arikaras Indians had reached their destinations; however they were recorded to be leaving the steamboat while still being contagious with the smallpox virus. The *St. Peter's* continued its course to Fort Union, North Dakota, making port on June 24, with Mr. Halsey onboard and already sick with the early signs of smallpox.²⁷

Although a first hand observer of the situation, Pilcher did not seem to be fully aware of the mounting number of fatalities, since no death counts can be seen in his records at this point. However, Chardon's journal was already showing fatal victims as early as July 14. In one of such entries, Chardon wrote:

Friday, [July 14]- One of the warmest days that we have had this summer-Weather smokey- A young Mandan died today of Small pox- several others has caught it- the Indians all being out Making dried Meat has saved several of them.²⁸

Soon after Chardon's first encounter, scattered reports of smallpox became clearer until they showed up on a constant basis. On July 20, Chardon indicated that "Mr May and Yoyo arrived from the Little Misso [sic] With two Mules and one horse- No News in that quarter, except the Small Pox." Chardon's journal kept up with daily activities and the effect of smallpox on the community. On July 25, he stated that "small pox has broken out at the Camp," and on July 26, that it "has broke out among them, several has (sic) died." By August 17, Chardon's journal was reflecting despair, "the Indians dying off every day- Were the disease will stop, I know not." By late August, Chardon was able to determine the ratio of people dying around him at Fort Clark. He wrote "the disease still Keeps ahead 8 and 10 die off daily, Thirty five Mandans [men] have died, the Women and children I keep no account of." By the end of August, Chardon wrote:

Month of August I bid you farewell with all my heart, after running twenty hair breadths escapes, threatened every instant to be all

²⁷ Ibid, 31, 39.

²⁸ These and the following quotes are from Heloise Abel, *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark*, 121-33.

murdered, however it is the wish of humble servant that the Month of September will be More favorable, the Number of Deaths up to the Present is very near five hundred- The Mandans are all cut off, except 23 young and old men.²⁹

Chardon's numbers of fatalities were not completely accurate, and he even admitted that he did not include women and children in his overall fatality count. By September of 1837, the situation had grown grim. A letter sent to General Clark by Upper Missouri Indian sub-agent William N. Fulkerson read, "it is with regret I have to communicate to you that the Small pox has broken out in this country and is sweeping all before it." Fulkerson continued, "I understand that it has broken out among the Assinaboine and Black feet Indians where it is also causing great havoc and distress."³⁰

Whether the stops made by *St. Peter's* were to the benefit of the American Fur Company, or under government decree, the journey of the steamboat upriver during the summer 1837 had a devastating effect on Native Americans. Each of the stops made by the *St. Peter's* brought the deadly virus into the homelands of numerous tribes. Upriver from Leavenworth lies the Council Bluff Agency, a grand trading ground for the Otes, Omahas, and Pawnees Indians. Further upriver from Council Bluff Agency was the Sioux Agency, which was developed for the Sioux and Ponca tribes in the region. Pierre Fort was close to the latter, and it catered to the Lakota tribe. Following Pierre Fort were Fort Clark and Fort Union, both located in North Dakota. Fort Union was the last stop for the *St. Peter's*, and one of the farthest outposts controlled by the American Fur Company. Located on the upper northwest region of North Dakota near the fork of the Yellowstone River, Fort Clark's population for trading was the Mandan's and the Arikara tribes. Fort Union, on the other hand, was a prominent trading site for the Assiniboine tribe. Records indicate that the native populations of Fort Clark and Fort Union were among the hardest hit by the smallpox outbreak, which also struck the Lakota tribe located around Pierre Fort, as well as other tribes north upriver like the Mandans, Assineboins and Arikaras.³¹

The government stepped in by providing vaccinations to save the tribes that had suffered fatalities from the smallpox ravage. General Clark "recommended that the government send agents to the Indian country to vaccinate the tribes, in spite of the fact that Indians were superstitious and might prove difficult to vaccinate." This seems to be a late gesture from the

²⁹ Ibid., 133.

³⁰ Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 33, 67.

³¹ Roberson, *Rotting Faces Smallpox*, 76.

government to the Native Americans suffering from this horrific disease, since a law had already been passed in 1832 for all Native Americans to receive vaccination for smallpox. The law allocated \$12,000 in funds, as it also explained the benefits to whom it was intended.³² The Government extended its help several years too late. On February 6, 1838, General Clark sent a letter to one C.A. Harris, Esq., Commander of Indian Affairs in Washington, stating that

the suggestions of Major Pilcher on the subject of vaccination, if promptly acted on, may be the means of preventing a great loss of life in the event of the disease [smallpox] spreading among the Indians at a future period.³³

By March 1838, physicians were hired by the federal government to overcome this epidemic among the Indian population. Records indicate that Pilcher and another Indian agent named Dougherty received \$500 for their services, and \$250 for two other Indian agents to fight epidemic. The vaccination process went rather successfully, despite rumors that the “white man” had “harmful” intentions. The overall indication suggested that the process had saved an estimated twenty or thirty thousand Native Americans.³⁴

Death Toll. The total number of Native Americans who were affected by smallpox during the epidemic of 1837-1838 is unclear. On March 15, 1838, the *Pennsylvania Freeman* reported on the devastation of smallpox in the upper Missouri as follows:

[S]mall-pox had been making the most dreadful havoc among the Indians on the Missouri river. A letter from Major Pilcher gives the following summary of mortality among the several tribes, so far as the accounts had been received. But it is feared the destruction will be equal to 30,000 souls.

Mandans	1,000
Minetarees	500
Ricaras	1,500
Assinneboins	10,000
Crees	3,000
Blackfeet	4,000

³² John E. Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher Fur Trader and Indian Agent*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 137, 319.

³³ Trimble, *An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, 33, 72-3.

³⁴ Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher*, 137.

Total: 20,000.³⁵

A letter by General Clark on February 27, 1838 provides us with different numbers from ones shown from *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. He stated that the Mandan tribe, once consisting of 1,600 people, had been reduced to only 31 by October 1, 1837. On March 17, 1838, the *Connecticut Courant* released a letter written by General Clark, consisting on a first-hand account of the number of tribal member's devastated by the outcome of the smallpox outbreak. The *Connecticut Courant* stated:

It appears that the effects of the small-pox among most of the Indians tribes of the Upper Missouri surpass all former scourges, and that the country through which it has passed is literally depopulated, and converted into one great grave yard.³⁶

The article continued to reveal tribes and tribal members who were deceased. Mandan tribe's fatalities concurred with the information previously stated. The Minetarees consisted of approximately 1000 tribal members and half of them died. Sharing the same fate as the Minetaree tribe was the Ricaras, as they had 3,000 people, and half had perished. In other cases, it is stated that "the great band of Assinneboine, say 10,000 strong, and the Crees, numbering about 3,000, have been almost annihilated..."

Until the mention of the Blackfeet tribe of the Rocky Mountains, the information gathered concurred precisely. According to *The Connecticut Courant*:

[T]he disease had reached the Blackfeet of the Rocky Mountains; a band of 1,000 lodges had been swept off, and the disease was rapidly spreading among the different bands of that great tribe, numbering...60,000 souls.³⁷

The letter by General Clark is insisting that the Blackfeet tribe as a whole was equivalent to 60,000. However, records do not indicate an accurate number of souls that were lost from the Blackfeet tribe. According to the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, "only" 4,000 Blackfeet were lost, making them an exception, since the other tribes listed by the *Pennsylvania Freeman* lost at least 50 percent of their entire tribe. Nevertheless, the newspaper stated that the United States

³⁵ This and the following quotes are from Unknown, "Dreadful Mortality among the Indians," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, Vol. 4 no. 1, March 15 1838.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

government expected 30,000 Native American lives lost to smallpox, showing that the number of 4,000 Blackfeet may not be accurate. General Clark's words relating that "the disease was rapidly spreading among the different bands of that great tribe [blackfeet]" supports that the Blackfeet had smallpox to an advance degree, and that their death toll may have been higher. Assuming that the government was correct, the Blackfeet would have lost between 10,000 and 15,000 members, which equals a quarter of the total Blackfeet tribal members.

In an article dated March 23, 1838, the *Waldo Patriot* informed its readers about the smallpox outbreak of the upper Missouri River. Its headline read: "From the *N.Y. Evening Star*, Appalling Destruction of North-West Indians by Small Pox."³⁸ The newspaper further reaffirmed our understanding of the death toll of the Mandans, Crees and Arickarees. When referring to the Mandan tribe's death rate, the article stated that they "have all died by 31," while the Minatarees were "living near the Mandans, numbering about 1600, were by our last accounts, about on half dead, and the disease still raging." The were several accounts on the spread of the disease and the places it touched, as well as the number of tribal members who were daily affected. Referring to the Assinaboin tribe, the article stated that "the epidemic spread into the most distant part of the Assinaboin country, and this tribe were dying by fifties and hundreds a day." The article referred to the symptoms that some members of the Assinaboin tribe suffered before dying. There was pain concentrating around the head and lower abdominal regions, and "the bodies turned black immediately after" death, "and swelled to three times its natural size." Concerning probable psychological effects of the epidemy, it stated:

The boat that brought up the small-pox made her voyage last summer, and the ravages of the distemper appear to have been greatest in October. It broke out among the Mandans July 15. Many of the handsome Arickarees who had recovered, seeing the disfiguration of their features, committed suicide! Some by throwing themselves from rocks, other- by stabling, shooting, & [etcetera]. The prairie has become a grave yard.³⁹

The actual number of Native Americans that perished will never truly be known; however, a strong consensus among the aforementioned newspapers lead us to believe that between 20,000 and 35,000 lives may have been lost due to the smallpox epidemic of 1837-1838.

³⁸ This and the following quotes are from John Dorr, "Appalling Destruction of North-West Indians by Small Pox." *Waldo Patriot*, Vol. 1 no. 13, March 23, 1838.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion. In the end “the American Fur Company was guilty of criminal negligence in the case of the epidemic of 1837.”⁴⁰ The evidence showed that the American Fur Company contracted the steamboat *St. Peter's* and her Captain Pratte Jr. to travel upriver. The Company was clearly responsible for the people onboard the *St. Peter's*; however the responsibility for the smallpox outbreak of 1837-1838 does not fall entirely upon the shoulders of the Company. Evidence has shown that the government of the United States was also partly responsible for the deaths of thousands of Native Americans in the upper Missouri River region. The government was responsible for the oversight of all vaccinations guaranteed to the Native Americans of this region by the Act of May 5, 1832. These vaccinations were not administered in a timely fashion. Due to the negligence of the United States government, and the American Fur Company, smallpox afflicted and killed a high percentage of Native Americans in the upper Missouri River region. The government was prompt to act on providing vaccinations, and eliminating the spread of smallpox before it afflicted more American Indians, and in this way, it helped save hundreds of thousands of lives. However, the damage was already done.

⁴⁰ Heloise Abel, *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark*, 319.