

Records of the City of Charleston Board of Health, 1857–1953

The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library

Compiled by Celeste Wiley, 2007

Collation: 0.25 linear feet

Description: This collection from the Charleston City Board of Health consists of reports, financial records, and contract between the years 1857–1944.

The reports contain three types of records. The first are Annual Reports of the Port Physician (1857 and 1860), which provides data of the ships that were quarantined in a given year, with a listing of the ships' name, where they had come from, and the cargo they carried. Also listed are specifics of disease type and number of deaths.

The second group, Annual Report of the City Register (Return of Deaths), list all cases of various illnesses (and deaths there from) within a given month for the City of Charleston (1857–1859). There is also a breakdown of deaths within age groups for whites and blacks.

Public Health Administration is a report compiled by the U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, C. V. Akin on the status of Charleston's Health Services in 1920.

Justification for a Health Center is a 1944 report by Charleston County Health Department Director, Leon Banov, M.D. that describes the current conditions of the Board of Health offices and why new facilities need to be built.

The financial records consist of two groups of payroll receipts from the City Board of Health and two ledgers. Among the payroll receipts, the first is to a group of carpenters for work between the weeks of April 10–May 8, 1869. The second is to a large group of various laborers for work on Bay Street for the week of May 21, 1879. The ledgers are titled "Suspense Payments for Typhus Control Work" and record payments from various persons and businesses around Charleston. They list names, addresses, amount due, and the amounts paid with dates ranging from 1942–1951. Both ledgers have moderately heavy moisture damage, which has made much of the writing hard to read.

The contract is an 1869 document between City Registrar Robert Lebby and M. H. Collins Company (an apothecary) to provide the City with all needed medical equipment, goods, and medications.

Historical Note: Charleston has a long history of attempting to help maintain the public health since its origination as a colony. Sanitation was early recognized as a matter of public concern. In 1671, the Assembly legislated that privies be filled, slaughterhouses removed from the town proper, and that garbage be properly disposed of. In 1685 and 1692, acts passed requiring the cleaning of streets and lots. These laws in the early years of the province resembled those of contemporary English municipalities.

In 1808, the City of Charleston established a Board of Health (BoH) whose chief duties were to check for contagious diseases and abate nuisances. It was comprised of thirteen commissioners, each assigned to a district. The Medical Society also appointed three members to make up a joint committee. Some of their many functions included: monitoring the rat populations; finding low areas in the city that required filling to control mosquitoes; and maintaining quarantine houses.

That same year (1808), Dr. J.L.E. Shecut established a smallpox (cowpox) vaccine institution. In 1816, the BoH urged the general use of the vaccination process and later succeeded in procuring the vaccination for the public.

In 1820, the Medical Society established Roper Hospital, which functioned as the community hospital for the City of Charleston. The BoH managed the hospital until 1888, when financial issues required that they relinquish management back to the Medical Society.

With the end of the Civil War, what is generally assumed to be the first full-time health department in the country was established in Charleston. It was concerned with not only the prevention of diseases, but also with the treatment of the sick and the administration of the city hospitals and well as maintaining quarantine houses and a lazaretto. In 1881, the Board assumed the responsibilities of maritime quarantine. The rising mortality rate among the African-American population of Charleston led to the placing of six doctors in six districts in an effort to control disease in 1885.

In 1898, the city employed a full-time bacteriologist. The city developed a central water supply to replace the old system of cisterns in 1904. These advancements helped greatly reduce the spread of typhoid from polluted water. Responsibility for the inspection of meat and milk began in 1900 and later, in 1919; an ordinance passed requiring the pasteurization of all milk sold within the city, a first in the United States. Many of these improvements were borne from various outbreaks of disease (mainly typhoid) over the years.

Despite all of the advances the city made in public health, there were frequent internal problems, which led to multiple reorganizations of the Board. In 1920, at the request of the BoH, the City of Charleston had the United States Assistant Surgeon General C.V. Akin come to Charleston to analyze the status of Charleston's public health care system.¹ This same year, the Charleston County Board of Health formed with the help of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1926, under the direction of Dr. Leon Banov, the City and County health departments physically combined into a joint office building on the corner of Meeting and Society Streets (originally the Shirras Dispensary). Working together allowed the Health departments to begin public education clinics, which informed communities about the spread of diseases such as typhoid, typhus, and smallpox; as well as the importance of vaccinations.

The departments merged into solely the Charleston County Health Department in 1936. In 1960, the Department moved into its own building on Calhoun Street that was equipped with clinics and an emergency room.

¹ 1920 Yearbook, page 154.

Records of the City of Charleston Board of Health, 1857–1953

Collection Outline:

I. Financial Records

- A. Receipt Roll of Hired Men paid by the Board of Health, City of Charleston
 - a. April 10, 1869
 - b. April 17, 1869
 - c. April 24, 1869
 - d. May 1, 1869
 - e. May 8, 1869
- B. Payroll of the Board of Health, City of Charleston
 - a. Four days ending May 21, 1879 (four sheets)
- C. Receipt Books; Suspense Payments for Typhus Control Work
 - a. 1942–1947
 - b. 1947–1953

II. Miscellaneous

- A. Contract; Robert Lebby, City Registrar & M.H. Collins Co., Druggist and Apothecary, 1869

III. Reports

- A. Annual Report of the Port Physician
 - a. Nov. 1857–Nov. 1858
 - b. Nov. 1859–Nov. 1860
- B. Annual Report of the City Registrar (Return of Deaths)
 - a. Jan. 1857–Dec. 1857
 - b. Jan. 1858–Dec. 1858
 - c. Jan. 1859–Dec. 1859
- C. Public Health Administration in Charleston, South Carolina, 1920 (two copies)
- D. Justification for a Health Center; Charleston, South Carolina, 1944