

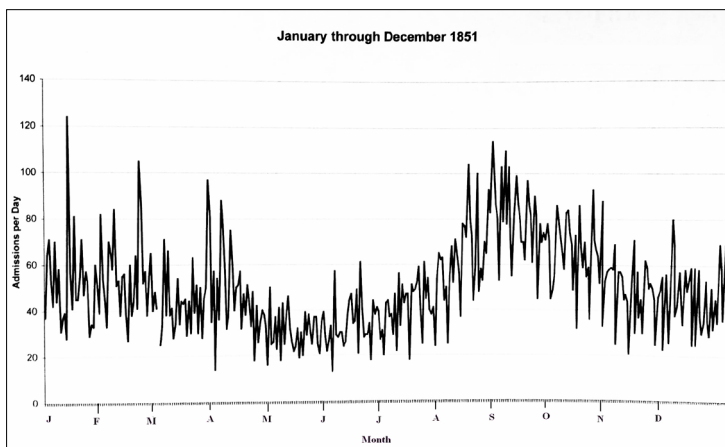
LW3 19th-Century Charity Hospital Admission Records—A Window Into Irish Life and Times

Colleen M. Fitzpatrick, PhD*, Fountain Valley, CA 92708

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the nexus between historical records and modern forensic analysis, as illustrated by 19th-century public hospital admission registers. This presentation will illustrate how much about the “life and times” can be derived from what 150 years ago was considered routine record keeping, when names, ages, and other data were recorded as patients were admitted to the Charity Hospital in New Orleans, LA. Each individual record is valuable as perhaps the only remaining glimpse of a life that otherwise would have been forgotten over a century later. Yet taken as a whole, the tens of thousands of records that eventually filled the admission books can be viewed as a collection of data rich with information about 19th-century economics, politics, and living conditions.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating how much insight into the past can be developed by applying modern forensic techniques to routine recordkeeping from so long ago. While it is exciting to see modern forensic tools applied to modern cases, it can be even more interesting to see what hidden information these same tools can extract in a context inconceivable to those who lived so many generations in the past.

In 1850, New Orleans was a city with a population of about 116,000. In the next few years, however, the town experienced a tidal wave of a quarter-million immigrants, over half of whom were Irish escaping the potato famine ravaging their country. Starving and destitute, the refugees offered a ready source of cheap labor. As pressure mounted on the city to drain land to accommodate its dramatic increase in population, the fair-skinned Irish were put to work in the subtropical sun, often standing knee deep in stagnant pools of mosquito-infested water. Disease was rampant and the free medical care offered by the Charity Hospital was the only alternative available to New Orleans’ poorest of the poor.



The admission data from this era are revealing. The number of admissions for 1851 was typical, drifting up and down, rising to a maximum in August, and then tapering off at the end of the year. There are positive and negative spikes superimposed on the curve. The largest positive spikes occur on specific days when the number of admissions suddenly increase well above the average, then quickly die away within a day or so. The negative spikes seem to occur on a more regular basis. These increases and decreases were caused by something that caused people to get sick—especially the Irish, who accounted for the majority of the hospital’s intake.

The answer could lie at least partially with the weather, which is normally hot and humid during the summer in New Orleans. But if so, why did the weather affect the Irish more than others, and what caused the three-week lag between the peak of the rainfall and the maximum in admissions? What caused the one-day spikes? How can the admission records for 1851 and those of other years be superimposed on a background of immigration and Irish culture?

Hospital, Epidemic, Irish