

The Scourge of Smallpox in New France in 1639-40: Did Guillaume Hébert die of the disease?

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Excerpted in part from *Hélène's World:
Hélène Desportes of Seventeenth-Century Québec*, a book by the same author.

Guillaume Hébert was the first husband of Hélène Desportes and not a direct ancestor of the author, who is a descendant of Hélène and her second husband, Noël Morin.

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Guillaume Hébert, born in Paris, Île-de-France, was the third child and only son of Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet.¹ Guillaume was a young boy when he immigrated with his parents to New France in 1617. The family has long been considered the “First Family of Canada.” Guillaume died in the settlement on September 23, 1639. Like so many deaths over the centuries, we are provided with no other details. In this case, however, the events and circumstances of the time give us some clues. It is likely that Guillaume Hébert died of smallpox.

In the fall of 1639, there were only about 200 colonists in all of New France, most of them living in or near Québec. The vast majority had been there five years or less. These French settlers were most concerned with the harvest and having enough food to sustain them over the coming winter. Nevertheless, they were certainly aware of the smallpox epidemic that was ravaging the native settlements along the St. Lawrence River.

The first recorded disease of European origin among the Native Americans north of the St. Lawrence River had struck in 1634, five years earlier. It is believed to have been measles and lasted through the winter of 1634-35. It is possible that the disease came with the arrival of Robert Giffard and a number of families from the Perche region of France in the summer of 1634. Some twenty-five children were included in their number.² In 1637, another serious illness spread through the villages of the Montagnais and Hurons. The indigenous population died in large numbers. In recent times, researchers have concluded that the culprit of the epidemic of 1637 was scarlet fever.

In the fall of 1639, the natives were reeling from yet another epidemic; this time it was smallpox. The symptoms of the disease were terrible. The sick experienced high fever, retching and severe pain. Ugly, oozing blisters covered their body.³ It is believed that the initial outbreak of the disease that so affected the natives along the St. Lawrence River began in the English colonies to the south. In 1638, a British ship that docked at the harbor in Boston carried smallpox. The disease was then carried north by natives returning from their visit to the English communities.⁴

The only surviving accounts of the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1639 come from the reports of the Jesuit missionaries, as published in the *Jesuit Relations*.⁵

On May 27, 1640, Father Jerome Lalemant wrote,

*It was upon the return from the journey which the Hurons had made to Kebec, that it started in the country, our Hurons, while again on their way up here, having thoughtlessly mingled with the Algonquins, whom they met on the route, most of whom were infected with smallpox. The first Huron who introduced it came ashore at the foot of our house . . . whence being carried to his own village, about a league distant from us, he died straightway after. . . . In a few days, almost all those in the cabin of the deceased found themselves infected; then the evil spread from house to house, from village to village, and finally became scattered throughout the country.*⁶

Native peoples had not been previously exposed to these virulent diseases which were introduced to the North American population by the European immigrants. They had no immunity, no resistance, and died in droves.

In his report of what occurred in the Mission of the Hurons, from June 1639 to June 1640, the missionary Father Barthelemy Vimont wrote,

*We have baptized more than a thousand, most of them during the malady of the smallpox which fastened itself indifferently upon all sorts of persons . . . among them more than three hundred and sixty children under seven years, without counting more than a hundred other little children, who, having been baptized in the preceding years, have been harvested by this same disease.*⁷

For the Amerindians north of the St. Lawrence River, this epidemic would end in the spring of 1640. In his visit to Huronia in the summer of 1615, Samuel de Champlain, the founder of the colony at Québec, estimated the population to be about thirty thousand inhabitants. The Jesuit missionaries took a census of the natives beginning in the spring of 1639 and extending over the winter of 1639-40. Father Jérôme Lalemant noted the results in his annual report,

We have had the means to take the census not only of the villages, large and small, but also of the cabins, the fires, and even very nearly of the persons in all the country -- there really being no other way to preach the gospel in these regions than at each family's hearth, whereof we tried to omit not one. In these 5 missions there are thirty two hamlets and straggling villages, which comprise in all about 700 cabins, about 2,000 fires, and about 12,000 persons. These villages and cabins were much more populous formerly, but the extraordinary diseases and the wars within some years past, seem to have carried off the best portion:

*there remaining only very few old men, very few persons of skill and management.*⁸

The number of people had been reduced by more than half over the course of twenty-five years.⁹ It is hard to imagine the devastation. Those who survived had lost spouses, fathers, mothers, children, and siblings. Not only were families destroyed, but the political infrastructure of the villages collapsed. The other indigenous communities along the St. Lawrence River, having developed no immunity to the disease, were equally decimated. When it came to smallpox and other diseases of European origin, the odds were very much stacked against the natives. The indigenous villages along the St. Lawrence River and beyond would never recover.

Smallpox and other diseases long known in Europe did take their toll on the French, but they were not as devastating as they were for the Native Americans. Over the centuries, Europeans had developed some natural immunity to these diseases, so that those who did become sick had more of a chance of recovering from these illnesses. Nonetheless, these diseases continued to be a problem for them as well, knowing no boundaries of age and rank in their ability to attack and kill.¹⁰

There were no trained physicians in New France in 1639 and there would be none until the end of the seventeenth century when Michel Sarrazin would be the first Frenchman to practice in this capacity.¹¹ Medicine was not a new profession for the French people. The subject had begun to be taught publicly in Paris in the twelfth century. Medications recommended by physicians were few: cassia, senna, quinine, antimony and syrup of roses. For physicians, bleeding and purging were the treatments of choice in the seventeenth century.¹²

While there were no physicians in Québec when the smallpox epidemic struck in 1639, there was at least one surgeon: Robert Giffard, seigneur of Beauport. Surgeons of that era attended the same schools as barbers and were members of the Society of Barber-Surgeons. Surgeons performed the blood-lettings, operations, amputations, and lancing of boils. Physicians and surgeons were considered separate professions. Surgeons did not have the status of physicians; rather, they were considered to be manual laborers or craftsmen. When physicians were available, surgeons often functioned as their hired hands.¹³

Fortuitously, on August 1, 1639, three Hospitaller nuns arrived in Québec to found a hospital in the young colony.¹⁴ To them would fall the heaviest burden of caring for the unfortunate victims of the smallpox epidemic. They had come from France at the invitation of the Jesuits. While these dedicated women intended to minister to the indigenous community, they certainly understood the need to provide these services to the French-Canadian pioneers as well. Undoubtedly, they were welcome additions to the tiny community. Before the nuns came, the Jesuits had constructed a simple hospital to serve the sick of Québec.¹⁵ Upon their arrival in 1639, the hospital was gladly entrusted to the care and management of the Hospitallers of St. Augustine, who managed the Hôtel-Dieu of Dieppe in the mother country.

The missionary Paul Le Jeune, writing at Sillery on September 4, 1639, noted that it was time to end his annual report before the ships left Québec to return to France. His last few sentences:

*The fleet leaves us in sadness, and in joy. The hospital is burdened with so many sick people, that they are obliged to lodge some of them outside in bark cabins. The [Native Americans] are sorely afflicted; it is said that they are dying in such numbers, in the countries father up, that the dogs eat the corpses that cannot be buried. The Hospital Nuns perform their duties with so much zeal, in these pressing needs, that they have impaired their own health. Those of our Fathers who visit and assist these poor infected people are in no better condition; this contagion alone will slip in among our French; some young women born in this country have been attacked by it. All this may cause us sadness.*¹⁶

The following year, in his report written in 1640 and entitled “Of the Nuns Recently Arrived in New France, and of their Occupation,” Father Paul Le Jeune wrote:

*The Hospital nuns arrived at Kebec on the first day of August of last year. Scarcely had they disembarked before they found themselves overwhelmed with patients. The hall of the Hospital being too small, it was necessary to erect some cabins, fashioned like those of the [natives] in their garden. Not having furniture for so many people, they had to cut in two or three pieces part of the blankets and sheets they had brought for these poor sick people. In a word, instead of taking a little rest and refreshing themselves after the great discomfort they had suffered upon the sea, they found themselves so burdened and occupied that we had fear of losing them and their hospital at its very birth. The sick came from all directions in such numbers, their stench was so insupportable, the heat so great, the fresh food so scarce and so poor in a country so new and so strange, that I do not know how these good sisters, who almost had not even leisure in which to take a little sleep, endured all these hardships.*¹⁷

In addition to the Hospitaller nuns, three Ursuline nuns had also arrived on August 1, 1639. The Ursulines, under the leadership of Marie de l’Incarnation, were prepared to dedicate themselves to the education of the young French and Amerindian girls living in the vicinity of Québec. However, the Ursuline effort to establish a school for Amerindian girls was put on hold shortly after their arrival. During the smallpox epidemic of 1639, the house of the Ursulines also became a hospital. There were not enough beds and hands to take care of the sick at the Augustinian Hôtel-Dieu, which had become known as “*la maison de la mort*”. Conditions at the Ursuline convent and school were not much better. There was no furniture; make-shift beds were arranged on the floor, with little room in between. The nuns had to step over and around the sick in their ministrations.¹⁸

Father Le Jeune quotes Mother Marie de l’Incarnation in this report, stating that what he was about to relate to his superiors came from letters that the Mother Superior had written him:

The patience of our sick astonishes me. I have seen many whose bodies were entirely covered with smallpox, and in a burning fever, complaining no more than if they were not

*sick, strictly obeying the physician, and showing gratitude for the slightest service that was rendered them.*¹⁹

Were there any French colonists who died in this epidemic? There are only two brief references to the French colonists in the missionaries' reports on the outbreak of smallpox. As noted in a preceding paragraph, in September of 1639, Father Le Jeune wrote, "This contagion alone will slip in among our French; some young women born in this country have been attacked by it."

A year later, on September 10, 1640, Father Le Jeune wrote:

*All the French born in the country were attacked by this contagion, as well as the [Native Americans]. Those who came from your France were exempt from it, except two or three, already naturalized to the air of this region. In brief, from the month of August until the month of May, more than one hundred patients entered the hospital, and more than two hundred poor [Native Americans] found relief there, either in temporary treatment or in sleeping there one or two nights or more. There have been seen as many as ten, twelve, twenty, or thirty of them at a time.*²⁰

No specific individuals were mentioned in the Jesuit's reports. Nothing definitive is found in the church records of Notre-Dame de Québec. While the church records begin in 1621, there are no records of burials until March 24, 1640.²¹ The church records make clear that the primary concern of the missionaries was the evangelization and baptizing of the indigenous population. Arguably of equal importance were performing baptisms and marriages among the French pioneers. There are numerous baptisms, a few marriages, and almost no deaths and burials recorded in the early years of the colony.

When the death was recorded, the cause was generally listed only when the death was the result of an accident or when the individual was killed by the natives. Accidents included death by drowning, fires, and falls. More often than not, the victim was a young male. Apparently when death was a result of illness it was not recorded, perhaps because there was no physician to identify the exact cause of death.²²

There are ways, however, to narrow the possibilities for those French-Canadians who might have died in the smallpox epidemic. It is very instructive to look at the family records, as constructed by the *Programme de recherche en démographie historique* (PRDH). We frequently find a baptism record of a child with no marriage or death record associated with that individual. It is a good clue that the child might not have survived childhood; infant mortality was high at that time in history.²³

According to the Church records, there were at least three pioneer families who might have lost infant girls in 1639. Guillaume Couillard and Marie Guillemette Hébert had a child baptized Madeleine on August 9, 1639.²⁴ Guillaume Hébert and Helene Desportes were parents of

Angélique, who was baptized on August 2, 1639.²⁵ Three years earlier, Noël Langlois and Francoise Garnier had a child whom they baptized Marie on August 19, 1636. The only church records we have of these girls are their baptism records. Jacques Bourdon, son of Jean Bourdon and Jacqueline Potel, might have been another casualty. He was born on March 26, 1637; only a baptism record is found for Jacques. It is interesting to note that three of these four families (Couillard, Hébert, and Bourdon) had settled in the Upper Town of Québec, not far from the hospital where the sick were being treated.

As mentioned early in this article, Guillaume Hébert died on September 23, 1639. He would have been in his mid-twenties. There is no burial record for Guillaume in the Church archives. The date of death is given on a document of the Notary Piraube, dated October 21, 1639, which provided for the guardianship of Guillaume's young children.²⁶ The cause of Guillaume's death was not recorded.

It is reasonable to conclude that, in all probability, Guillaume Hébert died of smallpox. He was a young man in the prime of his life when he died. Apparently he was in good health. Guillaume and his wife had just had their third child, Angélique, seven weeks before his death; he was present for her baptism. There are no records indicating that Guillaume died from an accident. In his report to his superiors in 1640, the Jesuit missionary Father Le Jeune alluded to the fact that some "two or three" individuals among the French pioneers had succumbed to smallpox. Robert Giffard, the settlement's only surgeon, was a friend of Guillaume Hébert. Undoubtedly, Guillaume made the acquaintance of Robert Giffard when the latter came to Québec in the late 1620s. Robert Giffard stood as witness to Guillaume's marriage in 1634. Giffard was treating patients at the hospital; those caring for the sick were overwhelmed and exhausted. As observed earlier, the young Hébert family lived in the Upper Town, a short distance from the hospital. It is quite possible that Guillaume was helping his friend in attending to the sick and from this exposure became infected with the virus. While many Europeans had acquired some immunity to smallpox, Guillaume had spent most of his years in the colony and probably had no previous exposure and no resistance to the disease. He was a small boy when he arrived in Québec in 1617, and the Héberts had not returned to France during the English occupation of 1629-1632.

More on the family of Guillaume Hébert²⁷

Guillaume married fourteen-year-old Hélène Desportes, daughter of Pierre Desportes and François Langlois, in Québec on October 1, 1634. When he died five years later, he left a nineteen-year-old widow with three young children to raise.²⁸ Three months later, on December 27, Hélène married the wheelwright Noël Morin.²⁹ Guillaume and Hélène's son Joseph and daughter Françoise would each marry and produce children. However, only the children of his daughter would grow to adulthood and marry. Guillaume's grandson through his son Joseph died as an infant or in early childhood.

Guillaume left descendants but none would carry his surname on to future generations. Louis Hébert, Guillaume's father and Canada's "First Farmer", would also have descendants only

through his daughter Guillemette, who married Guillaume Couillard. French-Canadians who carry the Hébert surname received that name from one of the other Hébert pioneers of New France.

The children of Guillaume Hébert and his wife Hélène Desportes

1. Joseph Hébert was baptized on November 3, 1636.³⁰ Charles de Montmagny, the governor of the small colony at the time, was his godfather. His grandmother, Marie Rollet, was his godmother. On October 12, 1660, Joseph married Marie Charlotte Depoitiers, the daughter of Pierre Charles Depoitiers Buisson and Hélène de Belleau.³¹ A year later, Joseph was captured, tortured, and murdered by Iroquois.³² The actual date of his death in the fall of 1661 is unknown. Joseph, the only child of Joseph and Marie Charlotte, was born on October 15, 1661. It is quite possible that Joseph might never have met his son. Presumably, this child died young, as there is only a baptism record for him. After her husband's death, Marie Charlotte remained in the household of her in-laws, Hélène Desportes and Noël Morin, for several years. She, but not her son, is listed with the other members of the family in the census record of 1666.³³ Marie Charlotte married Simon Lefebvre on January 11, 1667.³⁴

2. Françoise Hébert was baptized on January 23, 1638.³⁵ Her godparents were Guillaume Hubou and Guillemette Hébert. She was thirteen when she married Guillaume Fournier on November 20, 1651.³⁶ When she was fifteen, her first child was born. In the census of 1667, the family was listed as living in the nearby village of Charlesbourg.³⁷ The couple had fourteen children, all but the last one born in Québec. By 1679, the family had moved to the settlement of Montmagny. Eleven of the children grew to adulthood and married. Two died as infants. The fate of the last child, born in Montmagny in 1679, is unknown. It seems that in her later years, Françoise followed in her mother's footsteps as midwife, at least as far as providing emergency baptisms for infants in danger of dying shortly after birth. Although she is never listed as "*sage-femme*," she is listed as having baptized a couple of infants on their baptism records in the parish records of Montmagny. Françoise died on March 16, 1716 at the age of 78 and was buried at Montmagny.³⁸ On her burial record is the notation that her husband Guillaume was the founder of the church at Montmagny. There are a number of records in the civil archives of Québec where Guillaume is listed as a litigant.³⁹ Apparently there were more than a few disagreements between neighbors. Françoise lived in Montmagny for the last 37 years of her life. Many of her living children also settled in Montmagny.

3. Angélique Hébert was baptized on August 2, 1639.⁴⁰ Her godparents were Olivier Le Tardif and Marguerite Langlois, the child's great-aunt. The only Church record we have of Angélique is her baptism record. The infant was just six weeks old when her father died. She was still living on October 21, 1639, as she was named in a document signed by Governor Montmagny appointing a guardian for the minor children of Guillaume Hébert. Presumably she died before she was five, as there is another document in the Québec civil archives, dated October 7, 1644, concerning the sale of land on behalf of Joseph and Françoise Hébert, minor children of

Guillaume Hébert.⁴¹ Angélique is not mentioned. As noted above, she might well have been one of the girls who succumbed to smallpox in the winter of 1639-40.

¹ *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Genealogical Database*, (Montréal, University of Montréal, 2005) Individual record #25064 for Guillaume Hébert; Ethel M.G. Bennett, "Hébert, Louis." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Canada: University of Toronto/ Université Laval, 2000) Web. 24 Oct 2016.

² Gary A. Warrick, "European Infectious Disease and Depopulation of the Wendat-Tionontate (Huron-Petun)," *Archeology of the Iroquois: Selected Readings and Research Sources* (Jordan Kerber, Ed. NY: Syracuse University Press. 2000) 272.

³ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006) 97.

⁴ Warrick, "European Infectious Disease and Depopulation of the Wendat-Tionontate (Huron-Petun)," 273.

⁵ Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, an Ursuline nun who arrived in 1639, would write prolifically over the many years of her life in Québec. However, the majority of her writings have been lost to history. The only comments that were found alluding to the smallpox epidemic which greeted her upon her arrival in Québec were those quoted by Father Le Jeune in the Jesuit Relations.

⁶ Reuben Gold Thwaites, Ed. *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents(The): Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France*. XIX:87. Web 1 OCT 2016.

⁷ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XIX: 77.

⁸ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XIX:125.

⁹ David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008) 325.

¹⁰ In the spring of 1711, the Grand Dauphin, the healthy fifty-year-old son of Louis XIV, fell victim to smallpox and died on April 11. It was said that he was exposed to the disease when he knelt by the wayside to pay his respects to a priest carrying the Blessed Sacrament after a visit to an individual sick with smallpox. Source: Antonia Fraser, *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007) 295.

¹¹ Michel Sarrazin came to New France as a surgeon in 1685, but returned to France in 1694 where he obtained his doctorate of medicine at Reims. Returning to Québec in 1697, he practiced medicine there until his death in 1734. Ironically, his death was from a fever probably associated with a case of smallpox which had recently arrived in the colony by ship. Source: Jacques Rousseau, "Sarrazin, Michel." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Canada: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2000) Web. 10 May 2012.

¹² W. H. Lewis, *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1953) 180-81.

¹³ Lewis, *The Splendid Century: Life in the France of Louis XIV*, 187-89.

¹⁴ Irene Mahoney, O.S.U., Ed, *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings* (NY: Paulist Press, 1989) 136-40.

¹⁵ Benjamin Sulte, C. E. Fryer, and L. O. David. *A History of Québec: Its Resources and People*. Vol. 1. (Montréal: The Canada History Company, 1908.) *Google Books*. Web. 30 Oct. 2008. 35-36. Over the years, the simple hospital would go through many changes. The original building was replaced in 1646 and again in 1658. In 1672, an addition to the hospital was constructed .

¹⁶ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XVI: 215-17.

¹⁷ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XIX:7.

¹⁸ Mahoney, *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings*, 137.

¹⁹ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XIX:13.

²⁰ *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XIX: 9.

²¹ There are a couple of exceptions. There is a burial record of sorts for Noël Guyon, son of Jean Guyon and Madeleine Goule. On his baptism record, dated August 27, 1638, is the notation that he died 15 days after his birth. Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH), Baptism record #57127 for Noël Guyon.

²² Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins, André Guillemette, Yves Landry, Jacques Légaré, and François Nault. *The First French Canadians: Pioneers in the St. Lawrence Valley*, Trans. Paola Colozzo (Ontario: Associated University Press, 1993) 172.

²³ It is not a certainty that the child died in infancy, however, particularly in the case of males. There were a number of young men in the colony who engaged in the fur trade and left the confines of the colony. Their marriages, if any, and their deaths were not recorded by the Church.

²⁴ PRDH, Family record #85 for Guillaume Couillard and Marie Guillemette Hébert.

²⁵ PRDH, Baptism record # 57136.

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- ²⁶ *Pistard Database*. Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec (BAnQ), Québec, Canada. Accessed 20 July 2011.
- ²⁷ Information on the children of Hélène Desportes and Guillaume Hébert comes primarily from the *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH)*; Baptism, marriage and burial records are also found in the *Québec Catholic Parish Registers 1621-1900*, digitized and available at Family Search.org.
- ²⁸ PRDH, Family record #223 for Guillaume Hébert and Hélène Desportes.
- ²⁹ PRDH, Marriage contract #94107 for Noël Morin and Hélène Desportes.
- ³⁰ PRDH, Baptism record #57112.
- ³¹ PRDH, Family record #1375 for Joseph Hébert and Marie Charlotte Depoitiers.
- ³² Jesuit Relations, ed Thwaites, XLV11:89.
- ³³ PRDH, Census Record #95976 for Noël Morin and Hélène Desportes.
- ³⁴ PRDH, Marriage record #66715.
- ³⁵ PRDH, Family record #223 for Guillaume Hébert and Hélène Desportes.
- ³⁶ PRDH, Family record #699 for Guillaume Fournier and Françoise Hébert.
- ³⁷ PRDH, Census record #96974 for Guillaume Fournier and Françoise Hébert. Tanguay lists Guillaume as co-seigneur of the parish of St. Charles in his *Dictionnaire Genealogique des Familles Canadiennes*, 239.
- ³⁸ PRDH, Burial record #26478. Based on her date of birth, Françoise would have been 76 years old; however, she was listed as 86 on her burial record.
- ³⁹ *Parchemin – Banque de données notariales (1626-1789)* and the *Pistard Database*, both located at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ).
- ⁴⁰ PRDH, Baptism record # 57136.
- ⁴¹ *Parchemin – Banque de données notariales (1626-1789)* and the *Pistard Database*, both located at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ).