

TRINITY'S ROLE IN THE WORLD'S FIRST VACCINE

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For over a year the world-wide spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the international economy and all our lives in unforeseen ways. Humankind waited anxiously for the development of a vaccine to save lives, prevent serious illness, and lessen the pandemic's threat to the world's medical systems. For the past year "Vaccine" and "Vaccination" are likely the most used words in every language.

Many are unaware how Trinity, a small village in Newfoundland, played such a pivotal role in the development and application of the first ever vaccine.

Edward Jenner, a surgeon practicing in rural England in the 18th century, discovered that milkmaids who had contracted a minor infection on their hands from the udders of milk cows that had, what was known as Cowpox, were immune from the deadly disease called Smallpox. Smallpox epidemics had killed untold millions of people for centuries and was one of the most dreaded diseases. For years Jenner gathered anecdotal evidence, from farms throughout southern England, of milkmaids being immune to Smallpox. This led him to attempt in 1797 the first vaccination of any kind by applying the pus from the sores on the udder of a cowpox infected cow to scratches on a young boy's arm. The boy was then exposed to Smallpox and did not catch the virus. The words "vaccine" and "vaccination" were coined from Jenner's work. Edward Jenner's discovery is renowned throughout the world and he is recognized as the father of vaccination.

There is another person, forgotten by history, who played a major supporting role in Jenner's work. John Clinch and Edward Jenner were school friends in England and together went on to apprentice as surgeons in London when they were still boys. After years of study the two friends parted ways. Jenner went on to practice Surgery in the English countryside and John Clinch left England in 1775, at the age of 26, for the colony of Newfoundland. He initially lived in Bonavista but soon moved to Trinity where he lived until his death in 1819.

Edward Jenner's discovery of the world's first vaccine was not readily accepted. Surgery, in the 18th century, was not recognized as a medical practice

and a discovery by a lowly surgeon- whose skills were learned through apprenticeship, rather than study at a renowned university - was initially mocked by the medical fraternity, the British Government, and the press. (Yes, even before the first vaccination was given there were anti-vaxxers!) Edward Jenner was undeterred but needed to convince Parliament that a country-wide vaccination program must be initiated before the next, inevitable, smallpox epidemic.

For years Jenner had shared the progress of his work with John Clinch, his dear friend and confidante. Jenner sent a vile containing thread impregnated with pustular matter from cowpox sores to Clinch in Trinity. He directed Clinch on how to administer the vaccine by applying small portions of the thread to scratches made on the arms of people who had not previously suffered from smallpox.

Weeks later, when Clinch received the vaccine, he set out to administer it, as directed, to the people of Trinity. They, like the English, were initially reluctant to receive the vaccine. Having lived in Trinity for over 20 years, John Clinch was now a well - respected community leader, surgeon, Church of England priest at St. Paul's church, customs officer and magistrate. But still he was frustrated in his attempts to vaccinate the people. As Jenner had previously done in England, Clinch used a boy, his nephew Joseph Hart of English Harbour, to demonstrate that receiving the vaccine would do no harm and would prevent the recipient from ever suffering from or dying from smallpox. Eventually Clinch prevailed and in 1800 the smallpox vaccine was administered to hundreds in Trinity and nearby villages in the Trinity Bight (the first vaccinations in North America).

A smallpox epidemic had broken out in the village of Portugal Cove not far from the City of St. John's (now the provincial capital of Newfoundland and Labrador). The governor, fearing that the city would soon be decimated by yet another smallpox epidemic, summoned Clinch to travel to St. John's to tell him of his success with the Jennerian vaccination in Trinity. Working with medical doctors in the city, Clinch set up a successful vaccination program there.

John Clinch documented in detail his successful vaccination program in a report he sent to Jenner. Jenner used Clinch's report to support his claim before the medical fraternity and the British Parliament as to the efficacy of the Jennerian vaccine. Edward Jenner prevailed and the first vaccine the world has ever known was finally recognized.