

# Prayers for the Children

By Christine Comiskey

They knew it was coming.

It started its deadly march in Kingston, New Hampshire in 1735 and slowly crept its way north and south along the coast. Neighboring towns had already been devastated by it. All they could do was pray.

On June 21, 1736, Reverend James Chandler, pastor of the Rowley West Parish Church, wrote in his record book: *John Plumer, son of John and Mary Plumer, etatis about 2 years and ½ died June 21, 1736. N.B. This was the first child that died in this parish of ye same sickness of which great numbers have died in neighboring parishes.*

It was known as the Throat Distemper, believed now to be diphtheria, and it was a highly contagious and brutal killer of children. Within days of the first symptoms, the throat would swell up so severely that the child would die of strangulation. There was no cure, and nobody was known to have contracted it and survived.

Between June of 1736 and February of 1737, forty-eight children in our tiny parish died. Twenty-five families were affected, many losing more than one child. Some examples:

The second household to be affected by the epidemic was that of Francis and Mary (Cheney) Brocklebank, who lived in what is now the Brocklebank Museum. Three-year-old Samuel died on June 23. Four days later, five-year-old Francis and eleven-month-old Moses died within three hours of each other.

Elijah and Mary (Holms) Blaisdel lost all five of their children, between the ages of six months to seven years, within three weeks in September 1736.

Hours after her only daughter, one-year-old Sarah, drew her last agonizing breath, Ruth (Fisk) Easty gave birth to another daughter. She named her Sarah. A month later Richard and Ruth Easty lost their only son, six-year-old Zebulon.

John and Jane (Bayley) Heriman lost three children, ages ten, seven, and two, within eight days in August and September. Jane was eight months pregnant at the time.

John's brother, Samuel Heriman and his wife Jane (Colman) lost three children, ages four, two and one, in September.

John and Samuel's sister, Sarah (Heriman) and her husband Samuel Hazen lost five of their children, ages two to twelve, between November 1736 and January 1737.

Many of these children lie in unmarked graves, as stone carvers had great difficulty keeping up with the demand for gravestones. We can only wonder what words of comfort Reverend Chandler offered to those grieving families.

As we continue to face deadly epidemics and pandemics in our world today, let us be thankful for the many advances in modern medicine. We should keep those adversely affected by these illnesses—especially those in our world without access to healthcare—in our prayers, as well as those who put their own lives at risk in their dedication to helping them.