

# Sanitation and privies

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

"Sanitary Principles of the Construction of Privies," *Bulletin of the North Carolina Board of Health*, 4:1 (1889), pp. 5-7.

## As you read...

### THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH

This article, published by the North Carolina State Board of Health in 1889, tried to educate people about how to improve their health, as well as the health of their neighbors, by building proper outhouses.

In the late nineteenth century, Americans became increasingly concerned with public health — with limiting the spread of disease and with educating people on how to live healthier lives. The North Carolina State Board of Health was established in 1877, but received little funding at first and was not very effective. By the 1890s, concern about public health had grown, and the State Board of Health received more funding and took on a broader mission.

### BEFORE MODERN SEWAGE

Before the creation of modern sewage systems, people built and maintained their own outhouses, or privies. There were few regulations about how outhouses could be built or how human waste could be disposed of.

In the nineteenth century, scientific research found that many diseases were bacterial infections spread by poor sanitation. As part of its mission to prevent disease, the State Board of Health worked to educate the public about the need for proper sanitation.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What made a privy unsanitary?
2. What were the dangers of an unsanitary privy?
3. How should a privy be built to make sure it was not spreading disease?



Figure 1. Outhouses, or "privies," were common in rural North Carolina until after World War II. This privy was photographed near Greensboro in 1938.

It is only in recent years that we have come to a truer and more thorough understanding of the meaning of sanitation and its life-saving principles. More recent still is the application of these principles in a wholesale manner to the daily life of the citizens of a community, to prevent the spread of disease.

Typhoid fever, dysentery, diarrhea, summer complaint, and certain other diseases have been proven to have their origin in human filth. That is, in plain English, any person who contracts one of these diseases has either eaten or drunk the body waste of some one else who had the disease. Repulsive as this may seem, it is nevertheless a daily occurrence in the majority of our homes, especially during the warm months, and it must be so as long as the insanitary privy remains in any community, as will be shown below. There is, therefore, no more simple and far reaching phase of sanitation than that dealing with the reduction of disease by means of sanitary construction and maintenance of the privy, from which, or the lack of which, practically all fecal borne disease has its origin. It was with a full realization of this fact that the people of North Carolina, through their representatives, the members of the General Assembly, put themselves on record as desirous of protecting themselves and their neighbors from the ravages of fecal borne diseases, by passing a law in February, 1919, entitled, "An Act to Prevent the Spread of Disease from Insanitary Privies."

What constitutes an insanitary privy? It is best exemplified by the open surface privy, which is very commonly used in our State. In this type of privy, which is usually open in back from the seat to the ground, the excreta is deposited upon the surface of the ground, where it can be reached and scattered about by flies, birds, domestic fowls and animals and with every rain may be washed into the open well or spring, or into the adjoining garden, where vegetables become contaminated with the human filth. It is little wonder, then, that we have typhoid fever, diarrhea and dysentery, when we eat vegetables contaminated with human filth, when our wells and springs are polluted with it, and when the food upon our

tables is accessible to flies that were bred and bathed in the human excreta of our own family or of diseased neighbors. Therefore, the open surface privy, which violates every law of sanitation, is a nefarious institution in any community, and must be entirely eliminated.

On the other hand, a properly constructed privy is one in which there is a vault, pail, or tank which receives and retains the excreta until properly disposed of. This receptacle should be surrounded and protected by fly-tight walls. Self-closing lids should always be provided, and kept closed, in order to keep the flies entirely away from the filth. In addition, due regard must be paid to the protection of drinking water supplies from contamination, either by waterproof receptacles, or by locating at such distance from the water supply, and down slope from the same, so that the dangers from seepage and drainage will be done away with.

A discussion of each individual type of privy will be entered into in the succeeding articles.

From the foregoing, one is promptly convinced of the simplicity of the principles involved in sanitary privy construction. But, while simple, they admit of no compromise. In addition, another factor quite as important as construction is that of proper maintenance, without which no privy will pass the inspection of the State Board of Health. Specific directions will be given along with the discussion of the various types of privies that may be used.

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## On the web

### **The little house out back: The architecture of an outhouse**

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/5247>

In this lesson students will practice forming opinions and supporting them with facts by examining pictures of a North Carolina outhouse and an architectural plan of an outhouse. They will use their knowledge of history to draw conclusions about the conveniences available to people of different socio-economic groups in North Carolina.

### **An outhouse plan**

<http://images.lib.ncsu.edu/uap/Size3/NCSULIB-102-NA/10270/bh036801701.jpg>

An architectural drawing from the Built Heritage collection, North Carolina State University Special Collections Research Center.

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## About the author

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### **Figure 1 (page 2)**

Photograph by John Vachon for the U.S. Office of War Information. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.