

Columbia River Quarantine Station

By Jay Paulsen and Pat Johns

The Columbia River Quarantine Station was opened in 1899 by the U.S Marine Hospital Service, which became the U.S. Public Health Service in 1912. The station—located in Astoria, Oregon, and Knappton, Washington—was a response to pressure from Astoria and Portland businessmen who feared that a spread of contagious diseases would seriously affect their shipping interests. South American, European, and Asian ports had experienced active outbreaks of smallpox, plague, and yellow fever, and a global cholera epidemic in 1892 had many worried that the diseases would be reintroduced into the United States through ships carrying cargo to the Pacific Northwest.

Three decades earlier, in the 1870s, Oregon Governor LaFayette Grover had appointed a health officer, based in Astoria, who conducted inspections and provided quarantine services for ships anchored at Smith Point, near the mouth of the Columbia. Crew members with a contagious disease could be quarantined in a small pesthouse in Astoria, but ships that required fumigation because of the presence of rats or contaminated cargo had to go to Port Townsend, Washington, 275 miles away. That cost owners money, and pressure increased for more services in Astoria.

On July 7, 1894, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury John G. Carlisle wrote Adlai Ewing Stevenson, the President of the U.S. Senate, arguing that a proper quarantine station was justified in Astoria because of the increase in commerce it would support. Three years later, Oregon Senator George W. McBride introduced a bill in Congress to establish a facility for disinfecting ships on the Columbia River before they reached Portland. Congress approved a quarantine station at the mouth of the Columbia River on July 1, 1898, and appropriated \$30,000 to purchase land. A committee under the direction of the Treasury Department was created to identify a site.

Oregon residents resisted the idea of a quarantine station in Astoria, and an alternative site in southwest Washington generated considerable controversy among residents there. Finally, an old salmon cannery in Knappton, which had been owned by the Eureka & Epicure Packing Company, was selected for the fumigation and quarantine facilities. The station's offices for U.S. Marine Hospital Service officers and staff were located across the Columbia in Astoria, in the Spexarth Building at 8th Street and Commercial. The offices later were moved to the Scandinavian Bank building on 10th Street.

The Columbia River Quarantine Station was officially opened on May 9, 1899, by Assistant Surgeon Hill Hastings. By the end of the first year of operation, the staff had inspected 6,120 immigrants, passengers, and crew (two required quarantine) and 132 ships. Of the twenty-eight ships that required disinfection, sixteen had plague at the port of departure, one had a person on board with yellow fever, three had patients with beriberi (caused by a thiamine deficiency), and eight had baggage that needed to be disinfected. The first-year cost of the station and the services it provided was \$7,857 (about \$285,760 in 2023 dollars). In 1912, a pesthouse (also called a lazaretto) was built at the Knappton site to house and treat people from the inspected ships who had a contagious disease.

A medical officer with the Public Health Service oversaw ship fumigation activities; boarded ships to conduct inspections, sometimes during the night or in rough seas; and examined passengers and crew for evidence of infectious diseases or for signs of rats, fleas, or other vectors. When fumigation was required, pots of sulfur were set on fire in the ship's hold, which was sealed to contain the fumes in order to kill rats and fleas. In 1930, Quarantine Station workers began to replace sulfur with cyanide gas. Both methods involved dangerous work.

The medical officers at the Quarantine Station worked closely with immigration and customs authorities in Astoria, and both a medical officer and a customs official boarded all ships entering the Columbia River from a foreign port. Once a ship's captain provided a bill of health for the ship and crew from the ports of departure and they were medically cleared to enter the United States, the customs official reviewed the ship's manifest and the passenger and crew lists. Only then was the ship given pratique—that is, clearance—to proceed upriver.

The way inspection and quarantine services were carried out in the United States changed over the years. By the 1920s, U.S. Public Health Service personnel often carried out medical inspections in foreign ports, where fumigation and disinfection could be done before ships left for the United States. Hygienic practices and preventive inoculations also reduced the risk of people with contagious diseases entering U.S. ports. The need for U.S.-based quarantine stations was reduced considerably. By 1928, permanent Public Health Service medical officers no longer were posted in Astoria, and officers from the Port of Portland traveled to the Quarantine Station only when needed. The last entry in the station's log was made on October 1, 1939.

For forty years, the Columbia River Quarantine Station played an important role in preventing contagious diseases from entering the Pacific Northwest and to support the commercial development of the region. The old pesthouse at Knappton Cove was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 and has been preserved as the Knappton Cove Heritage Center, which opened in 1995. The center is the only known surviving pesthouse from that era of U.S. quarantine history that is open to the public.

Sources

Station Log, Columbia River Quarantine Station, Astoria, Oregon, May 9, 1899 to October 1, 1939.

Schuler, Friedrich E. *A Shield for the Columbia River: The Quarantine Station and the U.S. Public Health Service at Knappton Cove, WA and Astoria, OR 1890-1899*. American Humanities Press, 2021.

Anderson, Nancy Bell. *The Columbia River's "Ellis Island:" The Story of Knappton Cove*. Heritage Folk Press, 2012.

"Quarantine Guards Port From Disease." *Sunday Oregonian*, October 2, 1921, Magazine Section, p. 6.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

<https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/columbia-river-quarantine-station/>