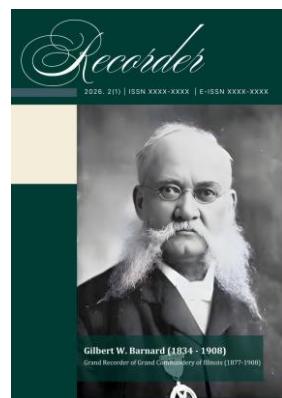




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National Hotel Disease (1857): The Story of One Victim — What Really Happened?

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Abstract

This article presents the author's interpretation of the events of 1857 associated with the National Hotel Disease. The author attempts to examine this incident through the life history of one of its victims. The study is based on two groups of historical sources: official reports and periodical press materials from 1857.

In the conclusion, the author notes that the present study makes it possible to consider the 1857 incident at the National Hotel in Washington not merely as an epidemic or a sanitary disaster, but as an event with potential political consequences. The biography of Alfred C. Barry serves as an indicator of the long-term impact of the poisoning on the lives of individual representatives of the political and intellectual elite of the mid-nineteenth-century United States. An analysis of official reports and periodical press materials reveals a number of anomalies, including the absence of quarantine measures, the coincidence of the peak of the disease with the inauguration of James Buchanan, and the severe and chronic consequences of the illness for a significant number of those affected. These facts make it difficult to explain the incident solely by sanitary causes. The hypothesis advanced in this article regarding a possible political motivation behind the poisoning does not claim to offer a definitive conclusion; however, it allows the event to be reconsidered within the broader context of the escalating crisis of American statehood on the eve of the Civil War. Further research on this incident may contribute to a deeper understanding of the hidden mechanisms of political struggle in the United States during the 1850s.

Keywords: Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888), National Hotel Disease, 1857, the story of one victim, hypothesis.

Introduction

In 2025, my article devoted to the biography of Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888)—one of the victims of the poisoning at the National Hotel in 1857—was published in the *European Journal of Contemporary Education*¹. The present article constitutes a continuation of this research. Its purpose is to identify and analyze the cause-and-effect relationships of this event within the broader historical context that developed in the United States in 1857.

Materials

The source base of the study consists of two groups of historical sources: official reports and periodical press materials from 1857.

The first group includes official reports, primarily the report of the Committee of the Board of Health entitled *The Washington Epidemic: Report of the Committee of the Board of Health*, published in *The New York Times* on March 25, 1857².

The second group comprises materials from the American periodical press of 1857. One of the earliest publications was an article in the *New York Daily Times* dated March 23, 1857, entitled “The Washington

¹ Cherkas, Alexander C. (2025). Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888): Minister, Educator, Mason // *European Journal of Contemporary Education*. 14(4): 617–624.

² “The Washington Epidemic – Report of the Committee of the Board of Health”. *The New York Times*. March 25, 1857.

Epidemic¹. In the same year, the epidemic was also addressed by the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, which published the article "The National Hotel Disease — Letter to Dr. D. H. Storer"².

Results

Our story begins on July 15, 1815, when Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888) was born in Walton, Delaware County, New York³. Shortly afterward, his family moved to Victor, New York, where Alfred received an excellent education from private instructors. Among his preceptors was Rev. Jacob Chase of Geneva.

At the age of 21, Barry was ordained a Universalist minister (1836) and served as pastor in several towns across New York State for the next ten years — Gaines (Orleans County), Homer (Cortland County), and Fort Plain.

In 1846, he moved to Racine, in the future state of Wisconsin. He would live in Wisconsin for the next 18 years and ultimately spend the remainder of his life there until his death in 1888.

Temperance and Public Education

When Wisconsin became a state in 1848, a temperance movement quickly emerged. That same year, the Sons of Temperance established a Grand Division in Milwaukee. Founded on the East Coast, the organization promoted a strictly alcohol-free lifestyle. Rev. Alfred C. Barry joined the movement and soon became a highly active member.

In Racine, he founded and edited the temperance magazine *The Old Oaken Bucket* (1849–1852) (Fig. 1). The publication became the official organ of the Wisconsin Grand Division of the Sons of Temperance⁴.

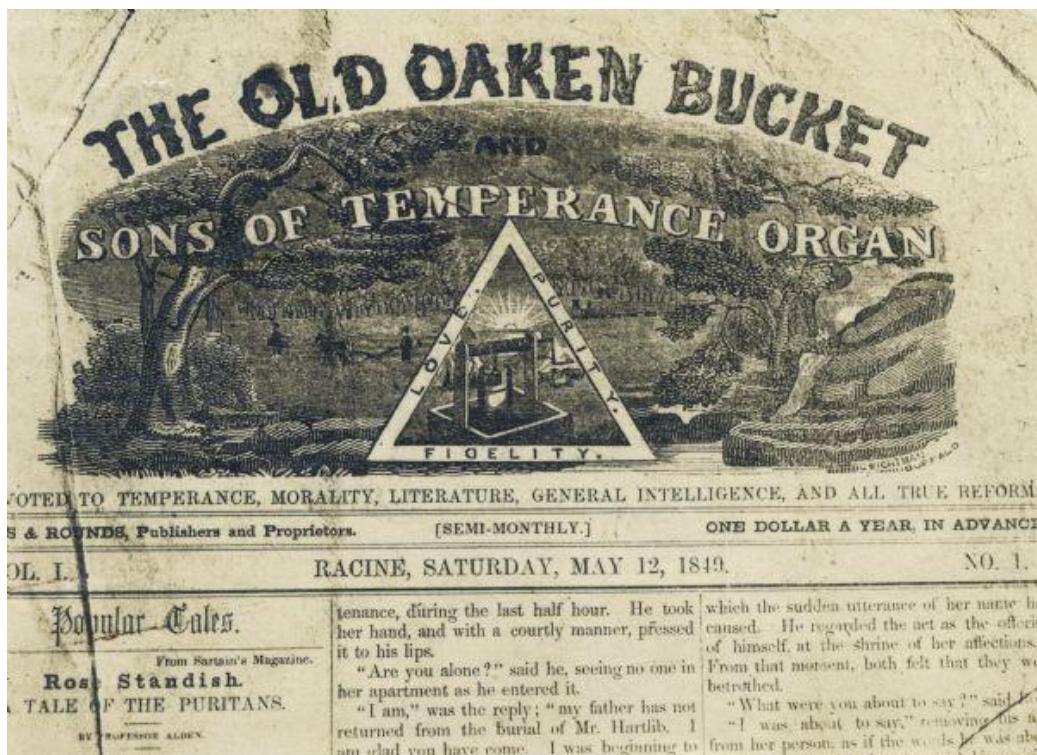


Fig. 1. Cover of Magazine 'The Old Oaken Bucket'

Simultaneously, Barry became deeply involved in public education. From 1849 to 1853, he served as the first superintendent of public schools in Racine. Pedagogically, he followed the ideas of Horace Mann, supported the creation of district teachers' institutes, and advocated for the consolidation of school districts.

In 1855, Barry became the 4th Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Wisconsin, serving until 1857. Politically, he was an active member of the Democratic Party⁵.

¹ "The Washington Epidemic", New York Daily Times, March 23, 1857.

² "The National Hotel Disease — Letter to Dr. D. H. Storer". *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. 1857. 56(19): 371–376.

³ Butterfield, C.W. (1880). *The History of Columbia County, Wisconsin*. Chicago, IL: Western Historical Company. P. 989.

⁴ Schaefer, J. (1925). Prohibition in Early Wisconsin. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 8(3): 284.

On November 4, 1856, the Democratic candidate James Buchanan won the U.S. presidential election¹. The inauguration was scheduled for March 4, 1857, and Superintendent Barry was invited to Washington together with his wife.

Arrival in Washington and the National Hotel Poisoning

In late February 1857, Alfred C. Barry and his wife arrived in Washington, D.C., and checked into the National Hotel (Fig. 2), where many inauguration guests were staying.



Fig. 2. National Hotel, Washington, D.C.

There, both he and his wife, along with scores of other guests, suffered a severe poisoning, now known in American history as the National Hotel disease — considered by some historians to be one of the largest poisoning episodes in the 19th century. If intentional, it would have been the most significant political crime of that century.

Even President James Buchanan himself fell ill, though he eventually recovered.

The disease was characterized by symptoms recorded by physicians at the time:

“The National Hotel epidemic manifested itself as a persistent diarrhea, often accompanied by intense colic. Those affected experienced sudden prostration along with nausea.”

Many victims never recovered and suffered chronic illness for the rest of their lives. Some notable fatalities included:

Rep. John Montgomery (Pennsylvania) — died one month later at age 51

Rep. John Quitman (Mississippi) — died 16 months later at age 60

Rep. David Robinson (Pennsylvania) — died 27 months later at age 43

For Alfred C. Barry, March 4, 1857, became the dividing line of his life: before and after the poisoning.

Once an energetic pastor, politician, educator, editor, and public figure, he now became — in modern terms — a person with severe long-term health impairments. The nature of his illness made further political service impossible. He did not seek re-election and withdrew almost entirely from public life.

The Civil War Years

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Barry volunteered for the Union Army.

From June 15, 1861, to June 8, 1862, he served as Chaplain of the 4th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment².

Returning to Wisconsin, he worked on the local recruiting board, helping enlist volunteers.

In 1863, he was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly from Kenosha County, serving in the 17th Wisconsin Legislature.

After the legislative session, on April 4, 1864, he returned to active military duty as Chaplain of the 19th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, serving until February 9, 1865.

⁵ Butterfield, C.W. (1880). *The History of Columbia County, Wisconsin*. Chicago, IL: Western Historical Company. P. 989.

¹ Cherkas, Alexander C. (2025). Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888): Minister, Educator, Mason // *European Journal of Contemporary Education*. 14(4): 621.

² Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861– 1865. Volume I. Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1886. P. 156-157.

On February 9, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln appointed him Chaplain of the United States Hospitals¹.

He was honorably discharged on August 15, 1865².

Later Life and Ministry

After leaving military service, Barry dedicated the rest of his life to missionary and pastoral work. In spring 1864, he moved his family from Racine to Fond du Lac, where they lived for four years. In 1868, the family relocated to Elkhorn (Walworth County), where Barry founded a new church³. In April 1878, they moved to Lodi, where Alfred C. Barry lived until his death on March 5, 1888 (Fig. 3).

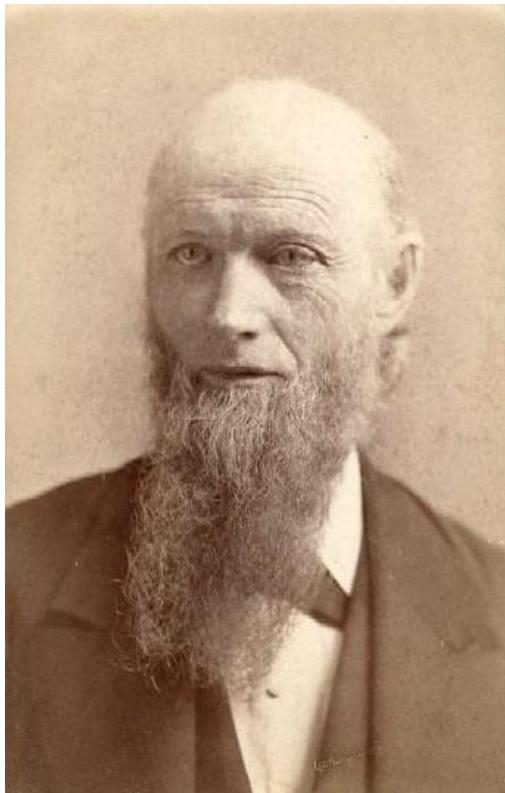


Fig. 3. Alfred C. Barry. 1870-1880s

What Was the National Hotel Disease?

To return to the question: what happened on March 4, 1857?

Historical records show that the outbreak at the National Hotel began in early January 1857⁴.

Cases briefly declined in late January, but a new and far more severe outbreak occurred in mid-February – just as political elites arrived for Buchanan's inauguration⁵.

An estimated 400 guests of the hotel were poisoned.

Several strange facts stand out:

Despite the outbreak, the hotel was never quarantined.

It remained fully booked – primarily by the top leadership of the Democratic Party.

The symptoms were persistently debilitating and long-lasting.

At first glance, the incident could be dismissed as dysentery or contaminated water. But this explanation becomes less convincing when viewed against the political climate.

A Hypothesis: Was It Political?

¹ Cherkas, Alexander C. (2025). Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888): Minister, Educator, Mason // *European Journal of Contemporary Education*. 14(4): 622.

² Butterfield, C.W. (1880). The History of Columbia County, Wisconsin. Chicago, IL: Western Historical Company. P. 989.

³ Cherkas, Alexander C. (2025). Sir Alfred Constantine Barry (1815–1888): Minister, Educator, Mason // *European Journal of Contemporary Education*. 14(4): 622.

⁴ "The Washington Epidemic", New York Daily Times, March 23, 1857. P. 2.

⁵ "The Washington Epidemic", New York Daily Times, March 23, 1857. P. 2.

The presidency of James Buchanan (1857–1861) coincided with the final polarization of the United States into North and South, culminating in the Civil War.

Given the rising tensions, political forces on both sides had much at stake.

Even before taking office, Buchanan's political stance was widely known.

Thus, a controversial hypothesis arises:

Was someone attempting to disable the Democratic Party leadership by turning its active members into chronically ill men — effectively removing them from political life?

Supporting patterns:

January 1857 — first outbreak: a rehearsal

February–March 1857 — major outbreak timed with the arrival of Democratic leadership

Many victims died within a few years; most survivors withdrew from public life

The Democratic Party entered the weakest period in its history: between 1861 and 1885, only one of six U.S. presidents was a Democrat

This perspective casts the National Hotel disease not merely as a public-health incident — but potentially as a political act with long-term consequences.

Conclusion

The present study has made it possible to examine the 1857 incident at the National Hotel in Washington not merely as an epidemic or a sanitary disaster, but as an event with potential political consequences. The biography of Alfred C. Barry serves as an indicator of the long-term impact of the poisoning on the lives of individual representatives of the political and intellectual elite of the mid-nineteenth-century United States. An analysis of official reports and periodical press materials reveals a number of anomalies, including the absence of quarantine measures, the coincidence of the peak of the disease with the inauguration of James Buchanan, and the severe and chronic consequences of the illness for a significant number of those affected. These facts make it difficult to explain the incident solely by sanitary causes. The hypothesis advanced in this article regarding a possible political motivation behind the poisoning does not claim to offer a definitive conclusion; however, it allows the event to be reconsidered within the broader context of the escalating crisis of American statehood on the eve of the Civil War. Further research on this incident may contribute to a deeper understanding of the hidden mechanisms of political struggle in the United States during the 1850s.

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