The Court Archive:
Mary Welles and the Cholera Epidemic of 1854

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The 3rd cholera pandemic from 1852 to 1859 was one of the deadliest outbreaks to hit the United States, as well as many parts of the world. Cholera is a waterborne bacterial disease that violently attacks a person's digestive system and was fatal in about 20% of cases in the nineteenth century. The public was generally gripped with widespread fear of the disease. While not known at the time, inadequate sanitation allowed cholera to spread at a rapid pace.

In 1854, the epidemic swept through the United States particularly hard. That year, cholera killed approximately 1,500 people in Chicago, about 25 people in Springfield, and 34 in Dixon (more than half of which died in one day). From June to August, the Springfield newspapers made daily notices about cholera on the national, state, and local level. "Early symptoms of cholera must be attended to. They are easily managed when they first appear," the *Illinois State Journal* noted on July 6.

Springfield attorney and real estate speculator Charles Welles died of cholera in July 1854, leaving his family to deal with a multitude of legal affairs. Charles Welles was born in Connecticut in 1812, graduated from Yale, became a lawyer, and moved to Illinois in 1840. Welles practiced law for a few years and was Master in Chancery in the federal court. After a few years of dabbling in the law, Welles became more interested in land speculation and acquired large tracts of real estate. Welles owned property in Sangamon, Christian, Macoupin, Mason, Morgan, and Peoria counties, totaling more than 5,500 acres and 140 town lots in various communities.

Like his Springfield colleague Abraham Lincoln 11 years later, Welles died without a will. His widow Mary Welles became the administratrix of his estate and needed to finalize land sales and sell much of the property to pay taxes and to accumulate enough money to support her and her four children (a fifth child died in the same cholera outbreak in July 1854). She did not wish to be in the business of buying and selling real estate and wanted to divest since nearly all of the land had been purchased by Charles Welles for speculation purposes and not for farming.

Mary Welles had to file a number of lawsuits to complete several land transactions and obtain unpaid debts. In the Sangamon County Circuit Court, she filed at least three lawsuits: one to

finish dividing land into lots to become the town of Buffalo (east of Springfield); one to receive final payment for another land transaction from George Cummins, who also died of cholera; and one against six people to make deeds for other land transactions. Another gentleman, whom Mary Welles was going to sue, decided to ask the estate to refund his $30 down payment in exchange for relinquishing his claim to the property. She accepted his offer. Mary Welles was also approached by other people requesting deeds to land that Charles Welles had sold but not yet finished the title work.

While some of the real estate work was completed within a year after Charles Welles's death, Mary Welles continued to divest herself of land until the mid-1860s. Her three daughters died in a scarlet fever epidemic in 1857, leaving her son Charles S. Welles as the sole heir. Mary Welles managed her husband's estate with skill and care, allowing her to live the rest of her life in relative autonomy and to provide her son with a sizable inheritance. After her husband's death from cholera, she was able to navigate the legal system in a time that allowed married women few rights. Mary Welles eventually moved to Pennsylvania and died there in 1880.