Mary Mallon, forever known as Typhoid Mary, carried the deadly disease and spread it to others. She was declared a menace and sent to live in exile on North Brother Island in East River for more than two decades.

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Illustration from 1909 shows Mary Mallon cooking skulls. Mary Mallon was not the only cook who ever made people sick with her meals. Still, one unexpected ingredient in her recipes gave her a unique place in American history. It prompted the courts to declare the Irishwoman a menace and send her into exile for more than two decades. It also bestowed upon her a nickname that would live on long after her death, popping up whenever an individual is thought to be a walking culture dish for disease: Typhoid Mary.

She had been hounded, deprived of her liberty and livelihood, and treated like a criminal, all because of a germ that had silently taken up residence in her body. Mallon was unaware of the intruder; in fact, she refused to believe it existed. Strong, healthy and independent, she never had typhoid and, she declared, was never sick a day in her life.
Born in Ireland in 1869, Mallon came to the United States as a teenager to cook for the wealthy. She enjoyed an excellent reputation and had a special talent for desserts. “Peach ice cream in particular was well remembered — even by her victims,” noted Anthony Bourdain in his book “Typhoid Mary.”

She might have gone undetected had it not been for a small typhoid outbreak during the 1906 summer vacation for the family of banker Charles Warren. They had rented a home in Oyster Bay and hired Mallon as their cook.

Mallon had been preparing meals for the family since early August. She left about three weeks after the first case emerged, which hit one of the Warren’s young daughters, on Aug. 27, 1906. Tracing her work history, Soper discovered a trail of typhoid back to 1900. Although many of the earlier outbreaks were attributed to tainted water, Soper found that Mallon was a common denominator. He believed she was a carrier, someone whose body could be teeming with germs, but never fell ill.
Soper announced his suspicions to Mallon, as she stood in the kitchen of the Park Ave. home of a new employer in March 1907. He asked for blood, stool and urine samples. She chased him away with a fork.

When he went to her home, only to be chased away again, Soper had no choice but to call in the New York City Health Department. “A menace to the community,” he declared her, and urged them to take action.

City health inspector Dr. Josephine Baker, with a couple of interns and four police officers, paid Mallon a visit at the Park Ave. address. Mallon slammed the door and fled, leaping through a window into an alley. Footprints in the snow and a piece of gingham wedged in the door of an outhouse gave her away after a three-hour hunt. Police hauled her out and Baker tried to explain the situation. Mallon was in a fury, cursing and fighting, and would hear none of it. When it became clear that there was no reasoning with her, Baker had police toss her into an ambulance. “I literally sat on her all the way to the hospital; it was like being in a cage with an angry lion,” Baker said.

Lab tests revealed Mallon was more dangerous than a lion, her body carrying high levels of the bacteria.

Deemed too infectious to mingle with the public, she was sent to North Brother Island, in the East River, where she lived alone in a little shack, her only company a fox terrier. Between 1907 and 1909, she submitted samples to doctors on a regular basis — 163 of them. Although she was under treatment, and many of the cultures turned out negative, health authorities insisted that she should stay on the island, alone or with other typhoid patients.
North Brother Island in East River where Mallon was quarantined.

But Mallon had other ideas, and she went to court. Her lawyer, George Francis O’Neill, filed a writ of habeas corpus. To this day, no one knows exactly how she found and paid for the attorney, but many believe that her benefactor was William Randolph Hearst. Her plight had become great fodder for the yellow journalism newspaper wars and paying legal fees was a terrific way to get the story.

Mallon’s case came before the New York Supreme Court in June 1909. O’Neill contended that she was not sick and that there was no compelling reason to hold her. Health department authorities countered that the presence of the bacteria in her body made it a matter of public safety that she remain isolated. The court agreed.

Then, in 1910, the New York City health commissioner decided to release her, under the condition that she never work as a cook again.

It was a promise Mallon could not keep. Five years later, an outbreak of typhoid in a maternity hospital started after a woman who looked like Mallon had been hired as cook. With that, her official total was 51 sickened and three dead, but no one has an exact figure since she worked under assumed names for several years.

Off she went, back into exile on North Brother Island, where she stayed until her death from pneumonia in 1938. An autopsy found evidence of live typhoid germs in her gallbladder.