

# THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918-1919

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

The entire year of 1918 was a difficult and sorrowful one for the town. Hundreds of Winchester men had served in the war and endured its horrors. Some were wounded. Eighteen died.

On the home front, during the first half of 1918 a severe epidemic of measles (229 cases) hit and claimed several lives, particularly among children. That fall, the influenza epidemic struck.

As if a world war was not enough devastation, while that was ending this plague descended upon the world, claiming at least twice as many lives than the fighting had. That fall and on into 1919, it swarmed across Europe and America. An estimated 30 to 50 million people died from it. At least a half million died in the United States.

“One fifth of the world's population was attacked by this deadly virus. Within months, it had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history,” a National Archives exhibit stated on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>2</sup>

According to figures cited in the *Boston Globe* of Nov. 1, 1998, in Massachusetts 28,870 deaths were attributed to influenza during 1918-1919. A very small proportion of those occurred in Winchester, but the opinion of the Winchester Board of Health was that the illness contributed to other deaths.

The flu appeared in Boston in August 1918. Although Winchester reported no cases during that month, in September the situation suddenly and dramatically changed. The report for the week ending on Sept. 18 reported 44 cases and evidently tried to allay fears by calling Spanish influenza “nothing more than the old fashioned grippe.”<sup>3</sup> The next week, 339 cases and two deaths had been reported.

Week after week the number of cases and number of deaths, sometimes for both influenza and pneumonia, were reported on the front page of the paper. On Oct. 4, for example, a day-by-day account of new cases reported 40, 32, 62, 38, 32, 35, and 43 new cases over seven successive days. By the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 800 cases of influenza and pneumonia and 11 deaths had been recorded.

The worst day was Saturday, Sept. 28, when 62 new cases were reported. The next day, the Board of Health decided to forbid all public meetings and close all schools, churches, and the library for three weeks in October. The library put the situation to good use by taking an inventory of fiction without interruption; however, the library was short-handed that fall since four assistants contracted the flu, none struck fatally. After the epidemic was over, the Board of Health wrote, “We wish we knew whether these drastic measures did any good or not.”

Winchester's medical profession rose heroically to the task of caring for the sick, although, the Board of Health reported, "so far no serum or vaccine has been discovered that does any good either in curing the disease or preventing it." On Oct. 4, it was reported that "while Winchester has and is having its troubles, our residents should note that we are infinitely better off, both in the number of cases and deaths, than almost any of the surrounding communities. Our conditions over other places are due in large respect to our abundant and efficient medical staff, and the local nursing association, and those ladies outside who are giving their unstinted efforts to the relief of the sick."

The nursing situation was so critical that the condition of individual nurses—who was on duty, who was stricken, and who recovered—was itself reported in the paper.

Not only medical personnel helped during this time. When the churches were closed, the minister and deaconess of the Episcopal Church announced that they would "give their time and strength to responding to all calls from homes stricken in the Grippe Epidemic," adding, "It does not matter whether the people who call for help are in the Parish of the Epiphany or not."



*Winchester Hospital nurses in 1915*

The help of the Boy Scouts was enlisted to distribute information about influenza printed by the state Board of Health to all the homes. "Many automobile owners," it was reported on Oct. 11, "have given the use of their cars to carry the district nurses in their rounds."

The epidemic reached a climax in mid-October. "By the middle of November," the Board of Health reported, it "had ceased to be epidemic, although a few scattering cases were reported each week." But in December another severe outbreak occurred, and the epidemic did not run its course until April of 1919. Even Gov. Samuel McCall was not immune. At the end of 1918 he was confined to his Winchester home while he battled the illness.

While 6,500 died in Boston, the total number of deaths in Winchester that were attributed directly to influenza was 32. However, the flu contributed to yet more deaths. After it was over, the Board of Health reported, "The terrible epidemic of influenza...left behind a trail of lessened vitality and lowered resisting power that increased the death rate for last year far beyond normal." In 1918, the board wrote that some people who died of other diseases "would have lived but for a previous attack of influenza."

The like of that epidemic has not been seen since and, one hopes, will not be seen again.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times*

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*Chronicle* on May 5, 2009. This article supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *Deadly Flu Pandemic (1918): Remembered at the National Archives*, on-line exhibit posted in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 20, 1918.