



THE HOURGLASS

NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCLXXXV

Northborough Historical Society
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

March 2020

COVID-19 Meeting & Program Cancellation

The meeting and program scheduled for Friday, March 27, 2020 have been cancelled due to concerns regarding the COVID-19 virus. We will try to reschedule *The Vikings: An Icelandic Saga* for a future date.

The Board of Directors will continue to monitor the situation and make decisions about other future programs.

Please keep checking your email, or visit www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org for the latest updates.

Most of all, stay safe!



History Corner

by Kathy Pierce

The Influenza Invasion of 1918

"Everybody is afraid of the Spanish Influenza, so many are dying with it," Rosa Crosby Warren of Northborough wrote in her diary on October 7, 1918.

Just as the world worries today over the effects of the widespread novel coronavirus, so it feared the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918 - and with good reason. Deaths around the world totaled 20 million to 50 million with 500 million sickened. Overall 675,000 Americans died with 25 percent of the population infected. In Massachusetts, 45,000 died. So far, the coronavirus has not been as disastrous.

Northborough with its population of just over 1,700 saw at least 9 deaths resulting from influenza between September and December of that year. Dozens were sickened.

Spread of the deadly virus, wrongly called the Spanish flu, was fueled by the movement of troops during World War I. In fact, more soldiers died of influenza than from the fighting. The flu did not begin in Spain. Some researchers trace its start to Fort Riley, Kansas, where hundreds of troops were training for war duty in the spring of 1918. By fall, the virus was rampant in the U.S.

In Massachusetts, the outbreak began in August among sailors in Boston, spreading rapidly to the rest of the state, particularly to Fort Devens. In her diary, Mary Mack

Mentzer wrote on September 30, "Letter from Albert (Mentzer) written Monday Sept. 7. 75 to 100 dying at Devens each day."

Here in Northborough, churches, schools and the library closed for a month per recommendation of the state governor. The library's report for 1918 noted that book loans dropped off because the service closed for a month in the fall.

In his year-end summary, the Superintendent of Schools wrote that it had been a very unusual year for the system. "Only four weeks of the fall term had elapsed when an epidemic of influenza made it seem advisable to close schools for a month," he wrote.

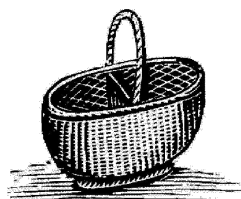
Despite these local efforts to contain the scourge, notice of the first deaths appear on October 8 in Rev. Josiah Kent's detailed journal.

"The influenza epidemic shows no sign of abatement...Today there were two deaths in town. Marion (Daniels) Moore, wife of Ernest Moore, died at 2 o'clock this afternoon, aged 26 years. This case is particularly sad, in as much as she was married only 16 months ago...She was a very lovely girl and is deeply mourned...The other death was Henry Leonard, aged 77 years. Mr. Leonard came to town several years ago as caretaker of Mr. Westons's estate."

Gruesomely, Rosa Warren noted in her diary that Marion Moore "turned black before she died." It was not unusual for the skin of dying victims to turn dark blue, the result of organs being deprived of oxygen.

Records show that the disease mainly killed young people

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Curator's News

by Ellen Racine

We are taking our Historical Pageant on the road again. We have been approached by Whitney Place to present our program on Friday, May 15 at 2:00 p.m. at their facility. If you haven't yet seen this fashion-meets-history event, please contact me or Kathy Pierce and we'll get you in.

Requests are always arriving through our website and answers are forthcoming. Realtors have concerns with historic properties, researchers ask about railroads, families ask for information about their ancestors and yes, stone-walls. We answer as best we can, about two or three requests a week.



Recent Accessions:

A photo of Francis McShane, who perished in WWII in Italy, was donated by Mary Cunningham and Jim Donovan, both relatives of Mr. McShane.

Another box of items was received from Rick and Dawn Daniell of Vermont. Of particular interest are letters written by Charles Robertson while he was stationed in France during WWI. They had previously donated photographs taken in France during that time presumably by him. These have already been scanned.

History Corner, continued

ages 14 to 45. Seven of those who died in Northborough from October to December were in their 20s and 30s. One was Harold Fitts, age 28, the father of two young children, who was active in town and church affairs and had recently been appointed to the School Committee. Wrote Rev. Kent on November 28:

"No services could be held at the house, for the reason that his wife lies at the point of death, a victim of the same dreadful disease." Happily, Harold's widow, Marion (Collins) Fitts, survived the illness and went on to marry Everett C. Mentzer (Mary's son) four years later.

Some of those who succumbed were listed as having died of pneumonia, which can be a secondary infection to influenza. Thus, even more deaths may have resulted from the flu than official counts indicate. For example, Ellen Williams, 8 years old, is said to have had influenza, but died of spinal meningitis, as did a couple of other people.



Nearby in Worcester, the first death came on September 19, when a 25-year-old sailor on a week's leave from the Newport Training School fell ill and died at City Hospital. Two days later his mother succumbed and soon after his father. Within days there were scores of cases in the city. The overall count in Worcester was 6,884 cases with 1,294 deaths by the time the epidemic came to a close in January. Hospitals in the city became overwhelmed, and an emer-

gency hospital opened on October 4 at the Greendale Fairgrounds to deal with the overflow. Perhaps some Northborough victims ended up there. According to the website *Influenza Encyclopedia*, Worcester's response time to the crisis was 15 days, the longest of Massachusetts' major cities. City officials came under much fire for tardiness in ordering control measures for the booming crisis. Would an ounce of prevention have been worth a pound of cure?

Back in Northborough, another tragic death came on December 4 when Cora Carey, 31, mother of eight, fell victim to the scourge.

Frighteningly, near the end of the epidemic, the disease invaded diarist Mary Mack Mentzer's own home.

"Everett about sick with a cold, but hope it isn't influenza," she wrote of her 30-year-old son on January 4, 1919. It turned out it was the flu. Thankfully for her and Everett, he survived, but it was a long haul. As she worked night and day to nurse him back to health, she chronicled his long recovery, noting when he sat up, got dressed or ate dinner.

Then on February 4, she wrote, "Everett shaved off 4 weeks of whiskers and went outdoors for a while."

At last, after months of anxiety and grief, the residents of Northborough began to breathe easier as the deadly epidemic came to an end in early 1919. The last death that mentions influenza was 16-year-old Marion Rogers. She died on February 21, 1919, of influenza followed by spinal meningitis.

Did you know that you could support Northborough Historical Society while shopping at Amazon?

When you shop through this link the Society will receive 0.5% of your eligible purchases made at Amazon. This costs you nothing - the program is funded through the AmazonSmile Foundation. You access the same pages and pay the same prices - the only difference is that you will see a small banner if the item is Amazon Smile eligible.

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Save time. Save money. Save space. Save a tree.

Would you like to receive the Hourglass by email?

Please email your request to northborough_historical_society@charter.net

Renewal of Membership

If there is a red dot in the address panel below, it is time to renew your membership of the Society.

**Next Board of Directors Meeting
Tuesday April 14**