



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

Sneeze, But Don't Scatter: Spanish Influenza in Falmouth

by Terry White, Meg Costello, and Brian Nickerson

Deadly epidemics have been known throughout human history. Modern public health measures were first deployed on a large scale to combat the worldwide outbreak of Spanish influenza in 1918.

“Spanish” influenza probably didn’t start in Spain. Media coverage just gave the impression that it did. Because Spain was not involved in the World War, it had no government officials working to keep morale-killing stories out of the newspapers. The Spanish press began to report large numbers of influenza victims months before the press in other countries, including the U.S., admitted that their nations were also affected.ⁱ

One theory today suggests that the flu began in Kansas, at Fort Riley, and moved with the troops across the U.S. and on to Europe. No matter where it started, the flu was bound to spread widely. Never before had so many people—soldiers and refugees—moved so far around the globe, often in crowded and unsanitary conditions.

On August 27, 1918, two Navy sailors at the Commonwealth Pier in Boston reported to the sick bay with the flu. Eight more sailors reported the next day and by the third day, nearly sixty sailors had reported sick. These sailors were diagnosed with the Spanish influenza.ⁱⁱ

By September the illness had reached Falmouth. It spread so quickly that the Board of Health soon called for a closing of major public facilities.

[PUBLIC] NOTICE.

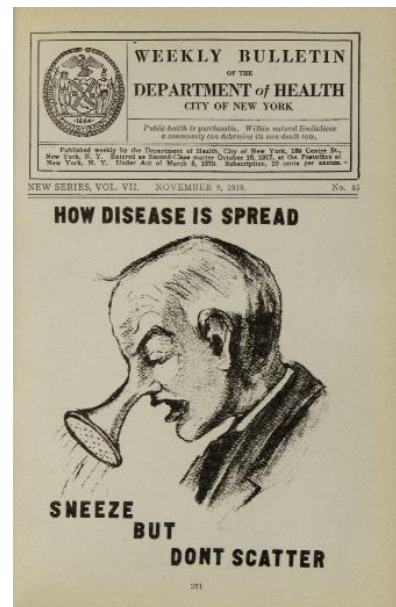
At a meeting of the Board of Health, held Thursday, Sept. 26, 1918, it was voted to suggest to the proper authorities that all places of amusements, Library, Schoolhouses, Churches and Clubrooms be closed for the present due to the spread of the Spanish influenza, and the Board sincerely hopes the entire community, one and all, will co-operate with us in trying to stamp out the terrible disease. Any information of whatsoever nature will be cheerfully given upon application to the Board.

Yours truly, DR. T. L. SWIFT, Chairman

DR. L. C. JONES, Physician

DR. G. E. F. DONKIN, Sec'y. Falmouth Board of Health

By M. E. Cook, Clerkⁱⁱⁱ



RECORD OF DISEASES DANGEROUS TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH																								
CLASS A												CLASS B						CLASS C						
Number	Date Reported	Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Address	Name of Doctor	Date of Onset	Date of Death	Cause of Death	Disposition of Case	NOTICES SENT TO				Disposition of Case	Burial	Milk Supply	Laboratory Findings	REMARKS				
												Sanitary Dept.	Health Officer	Local Board	Water Dept.						State Health Officer	Local Board	Water Dept.	State Health Officer
94	10/23/18	Caracas Santos Paris	Female	35	From	Seaside	Dr. E. P. Griffith																	
95	10/23/18	Lena Rodewich	Female	3		Seaside	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
96	10/23/18	M Santos children	Male	3		Seaside	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
97	10/23/18	Mrs. Sinophy Murphy	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. J. A. Howard																	
98	10/23/18	Herbert Mc Lam	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. Y. G. Merrill																	
99	10/23/18	Elvira Leffert	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. L. G. Merrill																	
100	10/23/18	Anethan Liman	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. Y. G. Merrill																	
101	10/23/18	Julia Marshall	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. Y. G. Merrill																	
102	10/23/18	John Husted	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
103	10/23/18	James Hallett	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
104	10/23/18	Mrs. S. Miller	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
105	10/23/18	William Old	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
106	10/23/18	Joseph Cary	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. Edwin Goff																	
107	10/23/18	Frank Rego	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
108	10/23/18	George Rego	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
109	10/23/18	Mary Rego	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
110	10/23/18	Mary Rego	Female	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
111	10/23/18	Joseph Rego	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
112	10/23/18	William Rego	Male	1		Falmouth	Dr. A. L. Patten																	
113	10/23/18	S. Miranda children	Male	2		Seaside	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
114	10/23/18	Belle Sylvia	Female	1		Seaside	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
115	10/23/18	Luis Santos Sister	Female	1		Seaside	Dr. L. C. Jones																	
116	10/23/18	Joe Terami	Male	1		Seaside	Dr. Y. G. Merrill																	

Dangerous Diseases ledger, 1915-1920, in Museums archives.

The school board followed suit, closing schools on September 26 until further notice. The board also requested that all teachers and scholars remain in town during this period.

By the time these measures were taken, the disease had already claimed at least two local victims. On the 21st of September, the *Falmouth Enterprise* announced the death of Jeremiah Maffeo, 37, an employee of the Cape Cod Food Conserve Company who resided at the Falmouth Hotel. Four days later the *Enterprise* reported another death, that of William Henry Hauston, 26, a manager of Standard Oil Company in Falmouth. Hauston, who died in his home in Braintree, had become ill ten days earlier. Hauston's wife, Gertrude, was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. E. Powers of King Street. The couple had two children. Of note in both of these cases was the age of the victims. In previous epidemics it was the very young and the very old that were most affected, but the 1918 epidemic took its toll on those in the middle years.

Of course, the young were not always spared, either. This sad death notice appeared in the *Enterprise* on October 19.

Died:—[In Waquoit], on Monday, Oct. 14, from influenza, Amelia Nunes Terra, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Manuel N. Terra, aged 1 year and 6 days. Interment was in the Catholic cemetery in Falmouth.

In the archives at Museums on the Green we have a series of town government ledgers titled "Record of Diseases Dangerous to the Public Health" (1915-1954). Column headers list the names of several contagious diseases that doctors were expected to report. Luckily, an extra column was included for "other" diseases. In 1918, a town official wrote "Influenza" across the top of that column. Soon, the check marks under "influenza" stretched across 23 pages. It was not uncommon for whole families to be infected. For example, on October 9, Mary and Joseph Rego of North Falmouth, and their four children, ages 14 to 22, were all reported to be ill.



To Prevent Influenza!

Do not take any person's breath.
Keep the mouth and teeth clean.
Avoid those that cough and sneeze.
Don't visit poorly ventilated places.
Keep warm, get fresh air and sunshine.
Don't use common drinking cups, towels, etc.
Cover your mouth when you cough and sneeze.
Avoid Worry, Fear and Fatigue.
Stay at home if you have a cold.
Walk to your work or office.
In sick rooms wear a gauze mask like in illustration.

November brought premature hopes that the epidemic was subsiding. On November 2, the Empire Theatre announced that it had been thoroughly fumigated and was reopening after five weeks of closure. Madge Kennedy was starring in "Service Star," the movie originally scheduled for September. The armistice on November 11 was marked by an enthusiastic gathering in Town Hall.

December, however, saw the number of influenza cases spike to 423. This resurgence led once more to the closing of schools, churches, and other place of public assembly. Eventually, the board of health and school committee reopened some schools—Woods Hole, North Falmouth and West Falmouth--while delaying the opening of those schools most affected by the epidemic--Teaticket, East Falmouth, and Waquoit. By mid-February all the schools were again operating. Because so many days of classes had been lost, the school year was extended until July 3.

In 1918, the closest hospital to Falmouth was the county hospital in Bourne.^{iv} All but a handful of patients were cared for at home, receiving house calls from Drs. Tripp, Pattee, Jones, and Wiswall. Perhaps the greatest help came from the Falmouth Nursing Association, an early incarnation of the visiting nurse program. Visiting up to 47 patients a day, these nurses prepared special food, washed dishes, and even cleaned house for those too ill to help themselves. Sarah Fay wrote to the *Enterprise* praising their efforts. Miss Fay urged her Falmouth neighbors to help acquire a "proper self-starter car" for District Nurse Evelyn Kelley, who was worn out "driving a balky machine—weary with much cranking."^v

The best defense against influenza was not to catch it, but in 1918, flu vaccines didn't exist. The Falmouth Board of Health published suggestions provided by the Massachusetts State Health Commissioner on "how to keep well" during the epidemic. Cleanliness, avoiding crowds, and using a handkerchief when sneezing or coughing were among the suggestions. "Allow no visitors and don't go visiting," was also recommended.^{vi}



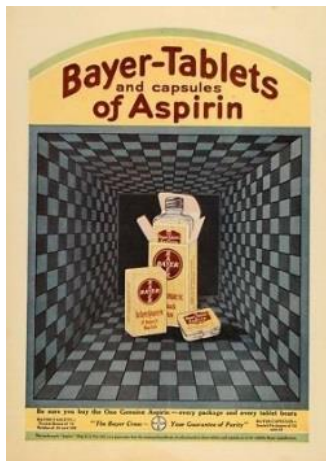
Nurse Ruth Newcomb visiting families in Falmouth, c1920. Photos are in Museums archives.

For those already stricken, there were several measures available to alleviate their symptoms. Lemonade was a popular home remedy. The *Enterprise* reported that

[s]hipments of lemons are being rushed eastward to meet the demand occasioned by the Spanish influenza epidemic. The sudden demand for the old-fashioned remedy—hot, sugarless lemonade—has caused hurry calls for the fruit, especially in New England, to meet this call. The growers in California are attempting to deliver all shipments to points where the lemons are most needed.^{vii}

What we might call an “alternative” remedy was also advertised: Oil of Hyomei.

There is probably no safer or surer treatment [for Spanish influenza] than to go to the nearest drug store and get one of the famous Hyomei Inhaling Outfits consisting of a bottle of the pure Oil of Hyomei and a little vest pocket hard rubber inhaling device into which a few drops of the Oil of Hyomei are poured. Just breathe this Oil of Hyomei deep into your nose, throat and lungs and then every particle of air that enters your breathing organs will be charged with an antiseptic, healing balsam.^{viii}



Bayer aspirin and Epsom salts were widely used, as they still are today.

Between October 1918 and the following April, 762 cases of influenza were reported in Falmouth, in a population of about 3,500. Some cases no doubt went unreported. A study of Falmouth death certificates issued in those two years suggests that Spanish flu had a local mortality rate of about 2.6 percent. This is consistent with the flu’s worldwide mortality rate of 2.5 percent. Some additional deaths may have been caused by complications of the flu.^{ix}

The total U.S. influenza death toll for 1918-1919 is estimated at 675,000—over ten times greater than the number of American deaths in combat during World War I.^x

By late April 1919, the epidemic was over in Falmouth. The memory of it, however, affected people’s sense of security for a long time afterwards. Distance no longer guaranteed protection against a faraway plague. Everyone had seen what happened in 1918.

ⁱ <https://www.history.com/news/why-was-it-called-the-spanish-flu>

ⁱⁱ Metrowest Daily News, October 29, 2009. See also Harold M. Schmeck, Jr., “Campaign on Swine Flu Virus Recalls the Pandemic of 1918,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1976, page B1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, September 28, 1918, p. 3.

^{iv} *Falmouth Enterprise*, November 2, 2018, p. 13.

^v *Falmouth Enterprise*, December 21, 1918, p. 3.

^{vi} *Falmouth Enterprise*, October 5, 1918, p. 8. Repeated October 12 and 19.

^{vii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, October 19, 1918, p. 4.

^{viii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, November 2, 1918, p. 2.

^{ix} *Falmouth Enterprise*, November 2, 2018, p. 13.

^x For civilian death toll see <https://virus.stanford.edu/uda/>. For U.S. military deaths in combat and other causes, see https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_principal_wars.xhtml. See also https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_losses_usa.