

The View from The Crow's Nest



Newsletter of the Mattapoisett Museum

October 2020 / Issue XXXVI

Preserving the past for the benefit of the future.

Memory and America's 'Forgotten' Pandemic

By Jeffrey Miller

In late September 1918, Roy Grist, a doctor stationed at Camp Devens – a training facility for soldiers during WWI – reported on the crisis the camp was experiencing:

Camp Devens is near Boston, and has about 50,000 men, or did have before this epidemic broke loose. This epidemic started about four weeks ago, and has developed so rapidly that the camp is demoralized and all ordinary work is held up till it has passed. All assemblages of soldiers are taboo.

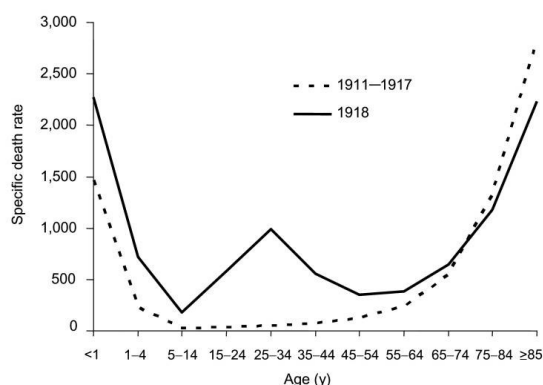
These men start with what appears to be an ordinary attack of "La Grippe," or influenza, and when brought to the hospital they very rapidly develop the most vicious type of pneumonia that has ever been seen. Two hours after admission they have the mahogany spots over the cheek bones, and a few hours later you can begin to see the Cyanosis extending from their ears and spreading all over the face ...

It is only a matter of a few hours then until death comes, and it is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible ... We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day, and still keeping it up. There is no doubt in my mind that there is a new mixed infection here, but what I don't know.

... It takes special trains to carry away the dead. For several days there were no coffins and the bodies piled up something fierce, we used to go down to the morgue (which is just back of my ward) and look at the boys laid out in long rows. It beats any sight they ever had in France after a battle. An extra long barracks has been vacated for the use of the morgue, and it would make any man sit up and take notice to walk down the long lines of dead soldiers all dressed and laid out in double rows. ("Flu Epidemic" n.d.)



Fig. 1: Interior of a Hospital Tent, 1918. John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). Watercolor on paper, 16 x 21". Imperial War Museum, London.



By the end of 1918 the strain of influenza described by Dr. Grist would spread throughout the world, infecting an estimated 500 million people and causing roughly 50 million deaths before it was over. The impact was so severe, that the average life expectancy in America dropped by 12 years for 1918. It is not only one of the most severe and deadly pandemics ever – it is one of the most devastating events in recorded history. Only the Black Death rivals it, though over a much longer period.

Fig. 2: This chart shows the difference between influenza's usual "U" shape and the "W" shape of the 1918 pandemic. After Taubenberger & Moren's (2006): 19.



Memory and America's 'Forgotten' Pandemic (continued from cover)

The pandemic struck in four waves. Initially appearing in the spring of 1918, it was largely dismissed, as annual flu outbreaks were not unusual. This particularly dangerous strain of influenza soon became known as "Spanish flu," a misnomer, as the outbreak did not originate in Spain, nor was it particularly prevalent there. Rather, Spain was neutral during WWI, and therefore reported openly on the disease. Meanwhile, censors concealed such data in most countries engaged in war.

In late August 1918, however, the disease exploded simultaneously in both America and Europe. This second wave was the most deadly, and responsible for the majority of deaths from the pandemic. The U.S. reported about 292,000 deaths between September and December, compared to roughly 26,000 during a similar period in 1915. The third wave occurred in early 1919 and although not as bad as the second wave, it was significantly more deadly than the first. Finally, the last wave struck in the spring of 1920 – this outbreak was relatively minor and confined to certain areas.

The reason the 1918 pandemic was so severe is still debated. Certainly, it seems that WWI contributed. The spread of the virus was likely exacerbated by the close quarters under which troops were lodged, the poor ventilation and sanitation of field hospitals, and the large movements of troops across the world. Soldiers may also have been particularly susceptible, with weakened immune systems due to malnourishment, gas attacks, and combat stress. As noted above, wartime censorship meant that the scale of the catastrophe was not clear, which led to delayed and insufficient initial responses. The virus also followed an unusual mortality pattern – while most influenza strains result in the most deaths among the very young and very old, this one exhibited a surprisingly high death rate among young adults (see Fig. 2). By the end of the pandemic, 99% of those who died were under 65, and nearly half were in the 20-40 range.



Fig. 4: Red Cross volunteers in Boston assemble masks for use at Camp Devens.

Mattapoissett in 1918-1919

The impact of the pandemic on Mattapoissett is difficult to discern. Camp Devens, in Ayer, MA, was one of the early hotspots, and was not far away, and Massachusetts was hit hard in the second wave. However, the available data suggests that the town's relatively low population density may have helped to prevent high infection rates. The 1918 town report notes 78 cases between September 26 and October 28, which would have been the height of the pandemic. This represents about 6% of the town's total population of 1352. Two of these cases were fatal, which almost perfectly matches the global case-fatality rate which is estimated to be around 2.5%. More densely populated areas didn't fare as well. By the end of September, Camp Devens reported about 14,000 cases, about 25% of the entire camp, and 757 deaths, more than double the rate that Mattapoissett experienced.

According to the town reports, Mattapoissett ordered all public gatherings discontinued in mid-September, including school and church. They reopened on November 1st, which may have been premature, as the town experienced another outbreak in December, when another 62 cases were reported. Luckily, none of them appear to have been fatal. The pandemic is almost absent from the report of the school committee, which merely notes at the very end that "The fall term was badly broken up by epidemic conditions, but it is hoped to complete a satisfactory year's work without lengthening the terms of school" (LeBaron



Dexter, et al. 1919: 4).

One notable loss from Mattapoissett was Florence Eastman (see Fig. 3). The only woman to enlist in WWI from town, Florence trained as a nurse before joining the Red Cross. In 1918 she was transferred to Camp Upton on Long Island, where she was in charge of 20 nurses and 100 orderlies in the Isolation Hospital. Tragically, however, she herself died of influenza on October 14th, 1918, at the age of 24. She was buried in Mattapoissett in Pine Island Cemetery, and in 1925 the local branch of the American Legion was named in her honor.

Memory and the forgotten pandemic

Despite staggering mortality numbers, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 received such little attention in the following years, that it has sometimes been dubbed “America’s Forgotten Pandemic” (see Crosby 2003). Much like the Mattapoissett school report, many sources from 1918-1919 barely acknowledge the effects of what was clearly a deeply traumatic event. An article in the *Fairhaven Star* from December 1919 even states it outright: “With the dread of a recurrence of influenza fading as the winter progresses, most of us are forgetting it as quickly as we can” (“Capt Dodge” 1919). Public health responses are available in newspapers and reports, but the impact the pandemic had on individual lives, and people’s reactions to it, are notoriously difficult to pin down. In many ways, the 1918 pandemic seemed to have largely faded from public memory until the bird flu began getting attention in the 1990s.

Some historians have argued that Americans were simply not impressed at the time, and therefore have not been all that interested since. In 1918, serious epidemics were more common than today, and people at the time would have already lived through outbreaks of cholera, yellow fever, typhoid, and tuberculosis. The speed with which the epidemic spread, killed, and disappeared may also have contributed to the lack of memorializing or writing about the pandemic. The war was most likely the largest factor, however. Influenza deaths were often reported side by side with war fatalities, and media attention was fixed on the conflict in Europe. For many, the flu and the war were one and the same, with “influenza deaths subsumed under the broader category of wartime losses and the pandemic recast as a chapter in the epic tale of World War I” (Bristow 2012: 10).

While as a whole, the nation may have turned its back, the 1918 influenza pandemic left an indelible mark on many families as countless lives were reshaped by trauma and loss. It may be understandable that



Fig. 3: Florence Eastman.



Fig. 5: An emergency hospital at Camp Funston, Kansas, during the flu epidemic.

Americans were preoccupied at the time, but it still seems unusual for such widespread suffering to be forgotten so quickly. It may be that this event reflects a wider tendency to minimize narratives of weakness or vulnerability. In the wake of WWI, the nation was absorbed with recovery, then the rapid social and cultural changes of the Roaring Twenties. This was accompanied by a sense of optimism, growth, and possibility, which was at odds with a public reckoning with the trauma caused by the pandemic.

Unfortunately, this national amnesia may have left those most affected by the event to suffer in silence:

Continued on next page



Memory and America's 'Forgotten' Pandemic (continued from page 2)

“What did the preference for the optimistic and redemptive narratives mean for those who did not embrace them, but who experienced instead the dissonance of popular interpretations that shared nothing with their own? How would the sense of opportunity and progress have sounded to someone who had lost a mother, a brother, a wife, a son? Is it possible that the upbeat narrative, embraced by many and clearly comforting to some, might have exacted steep costs for others?” (Bristow 2012: 194)

Conclusion

How we remember the past, perhaps especially for traumatic events, has real consequences. As of this writing, COVID-19 has killed more than a million people worldwide, and over 200,000 in the U.S., and there are some eerie parallels with the 1918 pandemic. How will we remember this time? What narrative will be prioritized over others? There have already been efforts to influence our perception of the scale of the tragedy, the effectiveness of the response of our leadership, and the pain that many are suffering. In 50 years, will COVID-19 be subsumed by the upheaval of the Trump presidency? Or conflated with the social and cultural progress represented by Black Lives Matter? Only time will tell.

The Mattapoissett Museum wants to record life in Mattapoissett during the COVID-19 emergency by encouraging you to keep a journal of your life and activities as a witness to this unprecedented time. Recording these experiences of your day to day lives for posterity gives future generations insights into historic events from a personal level. For any questions or if you would like to be contacted at a later date to donate your journal, please contact the Mattapoissett Museum at director@mattapoissettmuseum.org or leave a voicemail at 508-758-2844.

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A Message from the President

By Kyle DeCicco-Carey



I hope this newsletter reaches everyone safe and healthy. This has been quite the year and certainly not the year anyone expected. As you know by now, we have cancelled in-person events as well as our annual exhibit. Planning for and implementing our annual summer exhibit is a process that starts in the fall the previous year when the exhibit committee first meets to brainstorm ideas for the next exhibit. Planning, researching, and developing the exhibit takes place throughout the fall and spring. With Phase III of Massachusetts reopening plan, which includes museums, taking place in early July we felt we did not have the time or the necessary protocols in place to be ready to open.

Most importantly, as a volunteer driven organization we rely on many of you to help with collection stewardship, putting together and staffing events, and being greeters for the exhibit to keep the doors open. We feel that it is not worth asking our volunteers to greet visitors or volunteer for events where they may put their health at risk. The health and safety of our staff, volunteers, members, and the community is our most important priority.

In the meantime, we have obtained video equipment and a Zoom account with the help of a Mattapoisett Cultural Council grant to bring you online content and programming. We have several videos on our new YouTube page including local history lectures by Seth Mendell. We have also co-hosted a book discussion on Zoom in August with the Tri-town libraries and the YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts. This October we will be hosting the Gravestone Girls to learn about Mattapoisett cemeteries and early gravestone art. Later in the fall, we will host "Lighting the Way: Women of Mattapoisett" to learn about historic contributions of local women. We are in the process of lining up other events we can host online.

However, this is not a replacement for the Mattapoisett Museum as a physical place of community. The board of directors is currently working on a reopening plan to have in place when we are ready to safely open the doors again next year.

For the past several years we have been holding the Annual Meeting in September. Since we can't hold the meeting in person, we will conduct the meeting on Zoom. To give everyone enough notice we have decided to push the Annual Meeting date to January. Doing so will give us time to work out the details in presenting to you on Zoom, as well as lining up an exciting event to highlight for the meeting.

Throughout history there are moments when it is apparent one is witnessing historical events unfold. We are clearly living through one of those moments now. Schools in Mattapoisett have closed due to a pandemic just as they did in 1918. Only this time the schools did not open to finish out the school year in the spring. High school seniors did not get to experience the satisfaction of their hard work and accomplishments as they enter adulthood. Nationwide racial justice protests reached Mattapoisett in June when an estimated 400-500 protestors marched through the streets to Shipyard Park. It was the first such protest on the Southcoast.

MATTAPOISETT MUSEUM ANNUAL MEETING

This year's annual meeting will be held via Zoom in early 2021.

Stay tuned for details!



A Message from the President (continued from cover)

We have been actively working to document these historical moments, so that future generations will know how Mattapoisett dealt with and played a part in this period of history. In March, we launched a journal project encouraging people to document their lives and donate their journals to us, so that we have individual perspectives on history unfolding. I encourage you all to take part in this project. It doesn't have to be a journal. It can be a particular story, poem or even a work of art you create expressing your experience.

I know you all have had challenges to face with your family, friends, jobs, health, and more. Personally, my wife and I have had two children at home since March. Being out of school and keeping a distance from their grandparents among other issues has not been easy.

Thank you all for your support and understanding during these difficult times. If you haven't yet, please renew your memberships. If you can, please make a financial contribution during our Annual Appeal. Your financial support is vital to keeping the Mattapoisett Museum going through these difficult times and to ensure future generations continue to have a vibrant place to go for learning about how we persevered during this time in history.

Stay safe and well. We will see you again.

Kyle DeCicco-Carey

President, Mattapoisett Museum

Community History COVID-19 Journal Project

"Wet and cold again... The cholera seems to increase in England... Rode out and visited an aged woman, quite low. Am troubled with a stiff neck. Omitted going to Rochester, as I intended, on account of the weather." – Diary of Thomas Robbins, Mattapoisett. April 28, 1832.

The Mattapoisett Museum wants to document your lives during this historic pandemic. We want to record life in Mattapoisett during the COVID-19 emergency by encouraging you to keep a journal of your life and activities as a witness to this unprecedented time.

Everyone has unique experiences at this time such as having kids out of school, working at home, serving the public as a first responder, or providing other essential services. Recording these experiences of your day to day lives for posterity gives future generations insights into historic events from a personal level. Keeping a journal can also allow you to reflect on and cope with your experiences.

While you may think your day to day lives are mundane and trivial, future generations will want to know what you thought and experienced during this time. At a later time, the Mattapoisett Museum wants to collect your journals to record your history and that of the community during this unique period in time.

You can document your lives by thinking about how your daily routines have changed, your interactions with family, friends, neighborhoods, work colleagues and, religious and volunteer groups, thoughts and feelings on the current crisis or anything else you wish to write about.

The Mattapoisett Museum plans to catalog, preserve and make available any donated journals.

Your journal can be handwritten, typed and printed, or a digital (PDF, Word, etc). Please include your full name as the author of the journal and the dates of your entries including the year. The museum will be asking for journal donations at a later time.



Curator's Corner

By Jeffrey Miller

Well, this is a bit weird, isn't it? I'm writing this in the museum, when we would normally be open, and it's very quiet. I hope this newsletter finds everyone well. COVID-19 has been incredibly disruptive to our operations, certainly no surprise to anyone. Like many parents, I suddenly found myself trying to juggle work and full-time day care for my two children. Back in May we made the difficult decision to remain closed for the season, and to postpone our in-development exhibit. While there were many considerations to take into account, the main factor was the safety of our volunteers. We depend on the help of our community members, and we could not in good conscience ask people to put themselves at risk.

In the meantime, we are still working to improve and expand our online offerings. We are planning a series of online events, the first of which will be the Gravestone Girls on October 8th. This should be a great program, and I encourage everyone to attend – it's free, so spread the word! Stay tuned to the website and social media, as there will be more to come.

I'm hopeful that we will be able to open sometime in 2021, and I'm looking forward to revealing our latest special exhibit – *Mattapoissett's Strange & Unusual: Bosom Boards, Bibles, and Baubles*. See below for a little teaser. Meanwhile, we are still here for questions or donations, and we will continue working to improve the website, expand our collections, and provide the same services to the community, albeit with more social distancing.

For any questions, please contact the Mattapoissett Museum at director@mattapoissettmuseum.org or leave a voicemail at 508-758-2844. Please note that the museum is currently closed and voicemail will only be checked periodically.

Mattapoissett's Strange & Unusual: Bosom Boards, Bibles, and Baubles

OPENING SOMETIME 2021?

Come check out some of the weird, unusual, or just plain curious items from our collection! We've scoured the attic to find some interesting and entertaining things that have not been featured in previous exhibits. This will be a fun one, so don't miss it!





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This fall, the Mattapoissett Museum is bringing our programs to you.

Gravestone Girls



“Welcome to The Graveyard” Mattapoissett! On October 8th, we had a fascinating live virtual presentation by Brenda Sullivan of the Gravestone Girls about New England cemetery art, history, and symbolism, using examples from our very own Mattapoissett graveyards. Why do we have cemeteries and gravestones, why do they look like they do, and how have styles and art evolved over almost 400 years?

This was a fantastic event, but it’s not too late to check it out! You can watch the recording on our YouTube page here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1B1uVMfZSc>

Planned Giving

Planned giving is a way to leave a lasting impact on the Mattapoissett Museum. A planned gift is a charitable contribution that is arranged in the present and allocated at a future date. Commonly donated through a will or trust, planned gifts are most often granted once the donor has passed away.

A planned gift can:

- Ensure your assets support a cause that is important to you,
- Allow you to make a major impact without affecting your finances today,
- Reduce the federal tax burden on your heirs, and
- Preserve your ability to make changes in the future.

Please consider including a charitable contribution to the Mattapoissett Museum in your will or estate plans, a thoughtful and proactive measure to help the museum realize its mission. For over sixty years, donors have entrusted historical documents, photographs, and other artifacts to the museum. Going forward, it is our job to share them, teach others about them, and preserve them for future generations. Your planned gift will provide the resources for our success.

To learn more about making a planned gift, please consult your estate planner. If you have already included the Mattapoissett Museum in your will or estate plans, please let us know. We would be pleased to recognize you in our donor roster.

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By Lisa Hill

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LIST OF WOMEN VOTERS

October 23rd 1920

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