

Then and Now: How Ithaca responded to the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918

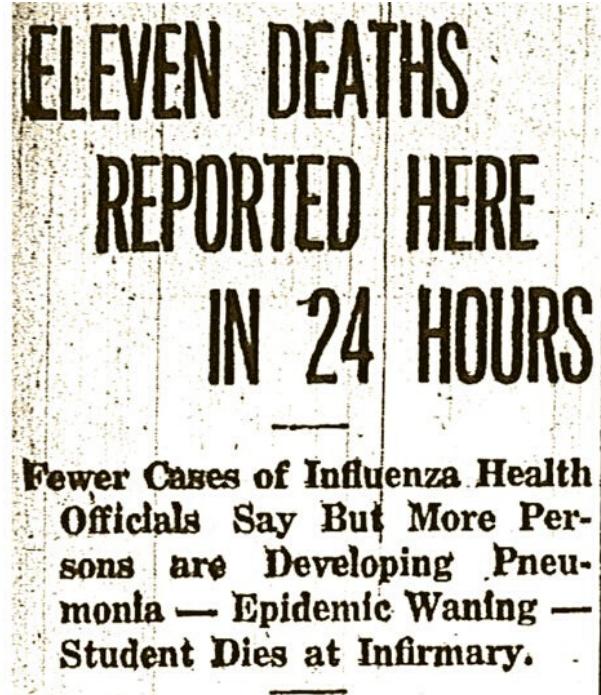
This article was written by Donna Eschenbrenner, Archivist at The History Center in Tompkins County - Published March 20th, 2020 in the Ithaca Journal

The History Center published this article in the Ithaca Journal in 2018, on the 100th anniversary of the Spanish influenza epidemic, and we have been asked to reissue it as people worldwide grapple with the dangers of coronavirus. In an effort to protect our staff, volunteers and patrons, The History Center is now closed, but we are still working to preserve local history. We are concerned about how people throughout Tompkins County are coping with these tumultuous circumstances. Let us know how you are doing by emailing archives@thehistorycenter.net, and we will gather your emails into a collection. They will become the first draft of history for our descendants, to help them understand what this challenging time was like.

In October 2005, a group of American scientists announced that they had finished their decade-long task of tracing the genetic sequence of the 1918 influenza virus. It was found to be a bird flu that jumped directly to humans, according to a report in the New York Times.

This 1918 virus was a different strain of bird flu from the H5N1 virus that infected birds in Asia, Europe and Africa in 2003, and it is not known how, or when, it moved from birds to humans. What is known are the grim statistics describing the devastating effects of that flu worldwide. In less than a year, 40 million people died (some estimates suggest an even higher number) — far more than the number of casualties from World War I.

In a 10-month period in late 1918 and early 1919, more than a half-million Americans were reported dead from the flu. And surprisingly, a disproportionate number of the victims were healthy young adults, between the ages of 20 and 40. The effects of this pandemic at a local level are harder to determine. Personal records, such as diaries and correspondence from this period, are scarce. Much historical focus is, understandably, on the devastating world war being fought at the time. However, a generous donation to the archives at The History Center in Tompkins County brings the local story of this worldwide catastrophe to light.



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A student from Empire State College researched the effects of the 1918 influenza epidemic in Tompkins County, using articles from the Ithaca Journal from October and November 1918, as well as a New York State Health Department report detailing influenza mortality rates. She donated her research materials and her finished paper, and the collection provides a snapshot of the unfolding tragedy in Tompkins County. In this time of concern about coronavirus, it is especially interesting. The earliest clippings from the Journal describe the alarming incidence of the flu in major American cities, such as Washington and New York. Its effects on troops too ill to be shipped to Europe were also significant.

The first ominous mention of a local resident ill from influenza is on Oct. 5. Within a few days, other references are made, many with what the newspaper called “grip” (or grippe), which is an old-fashioned word for influenza.

School closings, the shutting down of restaurants and bars and other public gathering places, and cancellation of sporting events are reported throughout other parts of the country. Local health department figures didn’t recommend such precautions here, instead saying that residents should go about their regular daily schedules, paying particular attention to cleanliness and healthy living, and avoiding sick people.

Then, rather abruptly on Oct. 8, the Journal reported 300 cases of the flu in Ithaca, and the opening of Cascadilla Hall on the Cornell University campus as an overflow hospital for the university’s infirmary.

As the days progress, more and more mentions are made of people taken ill throughout the county. By the next week, the epidemic is thought to be on the decline, although there were “several hundred patients being treated at the Cornell Infirmary, the City Hospital, and in their homes.” Shopkeepers, many with staff out sick, had a hard time keeping their stores open. Later in October, the county health board opened the Masonic Hall as an overflow hospital to assist the City Hospital, which was full. But county health officers reported “the situation as a whole is not considered unduly alarming.” Yet more deaths were reported from flu and pneumonia (often a secondary complication of flu), and later a total of 600 cases was reported in the City of Ithaca alone.

A shortage of nurses also was reported, and local health officials were not recorded as recommending the closing of public places.

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Throughout the crisis, personal columns and obituary pages reported illness and death from flu and pneumonia. Tragedy struck families repeated blows — two adult sisters died within an hour of each other, one at City Hospital, and one at her home in Trumansburg. One town of Ithaca family was almost completely wiped out: Four children and their mother all succumbed within a two-month period, leaving a devastated husband and father to grieve alone.

The final figures on illness and mortality were high for this small county of 35,000 people in those years — roughly 140 died, and while the number of sick was never fully calculated, it was certainly in the thousands.

It is impossible to determine whether a different approach by local health officers would have mitigated the tragedy in the county. Many areas that did implement isolation and quarantines also suffered terrible losses. This collection of historical materials offers researchers an opportunity to examine the facts for themselves.

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The archival collection used for this article is available for public view in the Thaler/Howell Archives at The History Center in Tompkins County (Located within the Tompkins Center for History & Culture on the Ithaca Commons) when we re-open the museum to the public. Explore www.thehistorycenter.net for updates and additional learning opportunities.