

# Pandemic 1918! Fighting Influenza During the Great War

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## Influenza Begins

In early March, Haskell, Kansas is the first to record an unusually potent flu outbreak. This outbreak coincides with a swine flu that has been killing local pigs since mid-February.

Within the week, the first wave of Influenza cases is reported at Camp Funston in Kansas. Between March 4<sup>th</sup> and March 11<sup>th</sup> 1918 over 500 soldiers become ill.

By the end of March that number climbs to 1,100. Luckily, the outbreak had few fatalities.

## Over There

The men of Camp Funston weren't the only ones suffering from the flu. In Europe. Spring 1918 brought the first reports among U.S. troops of a stronger than normal flu virus accompanied by a virulent Bronchitis seen in 10% of cases among the forces. Thousands of cases of this deadly new strain are reported through June and July.

Camp Dodge in Iowa also contracts the virus in early summer, just as their units are being called up to Europe. The 313<sup>th</sup> Engineers arrive in France August 2<sup>nd</sup> with several sick soldiers. Shortly upon arrival Captain Bruce R. Honeyman, of Co. A, dies of Influenza.

Influenza decimates the fighting armies of Europe. By late summer German forces have reported 30,000 cases, France 50,000 and Britain 30,000 cases of the flu within their ranks. Civilian fatalities are enormous; Germany has 225,000 deaths, France, 135,000 and Britain 225,000 deaths.



Geneva Castevens of Rantoul, IL dies of the flu while treating soldiers in a British Hospital.

The flu is rampant throughout the fall among U.S. troops. Roughly 30-40% of fighting men are sick. U.S. troops total 1.2 million men; 227,000 are hospitalized with wounds while 340,000 are hospitalized with the flu and its complications.

Reports of Influenza cover the globe from New Zealand to Norway.

The pandemic earns the moniker 'Spanish Influenza' due to Spain's honest reporting of their flu victims. Spain was neutral during the war and had no reason to be deceptive about their totals.

## Boomerang

August 17, 1918 an ocean liner arrives in the U.S. with several passengers ill from the flu. Soldiers and Sailors are returning from Europe infected as well. The first camps to report this new 'disease' are Camp Dix, N.J. and Camp Devens near Boston, MA.

This new Flu strain is unlike any other! The mortality rate climbs to 2.5%, that is 25 times above the normal annual fatality rate. No one is safe. Rich or poor, celebrity or student; all are felled equally.

FDR, Assistant Secretary to the Navy, contracts the flu. Walt Disney, Mary Pickford, Bess Wallace all contract the flu and survive.



Mary Pickford: courtesy of Wikipedia Commons

## War Comes Home!

### Massachusetts:

Boston, men aboard the Receiving Ship at Boston Commonwealth Pier begin reporting the flu on August 28<sup>th</sup>. By September 5<sup>th</sup> dozens of sailors are ill.

Dr. John S. Hitchcock of Massachusetts State Department of Health immediately issues a warning to state health officials of the disastrous implications if this gets into the general population.

By September 11<sup>th</sup> Hitchcock's worst fear has materialized. civilians begin pouring into local hospitals with the flu. All along the eastern seaboard thousands of civilians and military personnel are reporting 'the grippe.'

Charlestown (Boston Navy Yard) took every precaution to stem the tide of the flu. They moved healthy sailors to barracks in Framingham and cancelled the transport of sailors to other bases.

September 21<sup>st</sup>, with thousands of reported flu cases already reported, Boston's health commissioner Dr. William C. Woodward (new to the job) felt the outbreak had crested and the worst was over.

The order to close schools was issued on September 25<sup>th</sup> and the order to close all public assemblages was ordered the next day. Teachers volunteered as aid workers in the fight against the disease.

The flu was made a reportable disease on October 2<sup>nd</sup>. By spring 1919 over 5,000 Bostonians had died.

Camp Devens, 35 miles from Boston, becomes ground zero for 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of the influenza outbreak. The first soldier came into the hospital on September 7<sup>th</sup> and was misdiagnosed with Spinal Meningitis. Murmurs of other sick men traveled through the base, but no one arrived at the hospital. Then...

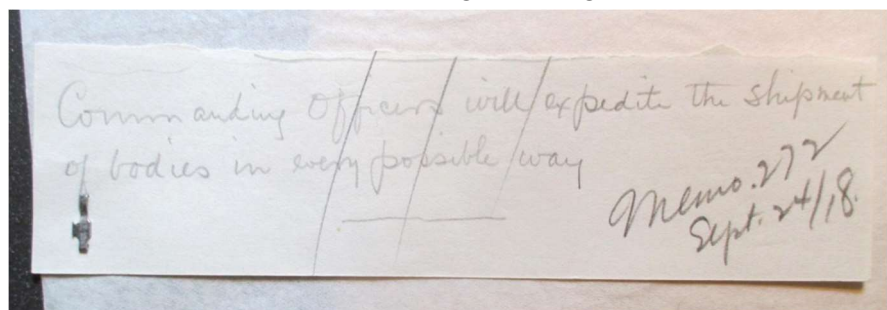
BOOM! On September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1,543 men reported sick. In the end over 8800 men, nearly 20% of the Entire camp become ill (45,000 strong).

The Camp Devens base hospital was equipped to handle 1200 men under the care of 25 staff doctors, but thousands of men begin pouring in.

Overwhelmed, and ill themselves, the medical staff close the hospital September 26<sup>th</sup>. Red Cross sends twelve more nurses- eight of whom became ill and two died, including Ms. Margaret Sullivan.

By the start of October, one hundred men a day are dying. 6,000 men were ill.

The U.S. Army immediately sends Cols. William Welch, Rufus Cole and Victor Vaughn to investigate. Welch, who had worked in



Note in Camp Devens Medical Files National Archives II College Park, MD

the Canal Zone with the Malaria outbreak, is visibly shaken by what he sees. None of them know how to contain or end the disease.

Towns like Ayer, Fitchburg and Harvard are leveled by the flu as it tears across the state.

## Philadelphia:

Philadelphia ignored all public health warnings, continuing with their liberty bond parade.

September 28<sup>th</sup> over 200,000 people took to the streets to celebrate. Within 72 hours, thousands of flu cases began appearing at local hospitals.

On October 10, 1918 alone 759 people perished from the epidemic! Within one month over 12,000 people were dead from the flu!

Philadelphia's Women's Groups offer five dollars to anyone who would pick up a shove and bury the dead. There were no volunteers.

Mass graves were created to bury the vast number of dead. Priests from St. Charles Seminary were sent into the neighborhoods to collect the dead and bring them for burial.

## Camp Grant, Rockford, IL:

Camp Grant was one of the most heavily impacted Army bases in the fall of 1918.

Career officer, Commander Charles Hagadorn, was appointed Commander of Camp Grant on August 8<sup>th</sup>.

He ignored all staff recommendations to avoid consolidating men out of the tents and into the barracks. He wanted all the men out of the tents before winter to avoid illness.

September 15<sup>th</sup> several officers arrive from Camp Devens. First soldiers report ill September 21<sup>st</sup>.

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, the day that the 500<sup>th</sup> soldier died, Hagadorn committed suicide in his office.

45,000 men were stationed at Camp Grant. By October 31<sup>st</sup> over 12,000 soldiers and staff had caught the flu and 1,068 were reported to have perished.

## Great Lakes Naval Training Station, IL:

September 8<sup>th</sup> the first group of men report to the base hospital with the flu. Newspapers report meningitis.

Commander acts quickly, refuses liberty leave to all and quarantines 1,000 symptomatic men.



Philadelphia Public Ledger October 14, 1918 courtesy of  
Chronicling America

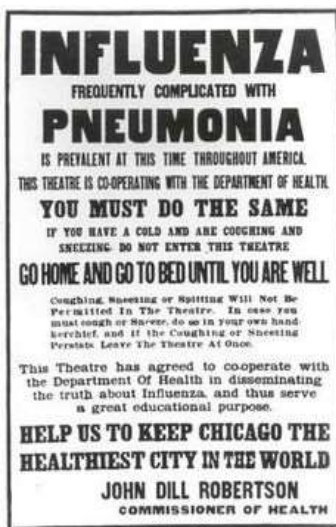
Within a week 5,000 more men are quarantined for suspected contact with the ill. All 50,000 sailors given daily throat sprays.

The total registered flu cases on September 26<sup>th</sup> is 8,475 with 257 new cases the previous day. Men are dying at an alarming rate. Great Lakes buys up all winding sheets in Chicago.

The morgue is at capacity. Ambulances leave around the clock to take bodies to the train station.

## Chicago, Illinois:

Public Health Commissioner John Dill Robertson seeing what is happening at Great Lakes, claims to be 'keeping an eye' on the situation on September 16<sup>th</sup>.



Chicago Tribune Advertisement  
October 16<sup>th</sup> 1918. Courtesy of Fold3

A marked uptick in flu cases is reported September 21<sup>st</sup>, but on September 23<sup>rd</sup> Robertson declares “We have the Spanish Influenza situation well in hand.”

September 30<sup>th</sup> there are 260 verified cases. Commissioner Robertson still fails to take action. October 1<sup>st</sup>, he agrees to quarantine those who are symptomatic.

Within the week, the numbers catching the flu are astronomical, over 40,000 residents are sick. Robertson proudly proclaims, “The Backbone of the Epidemic is Broken.”

October 8<sup>th</sup> Robertson orders the closing of theatres and entertainment centers, but nothing else. Schools, bowling alleys, saloons, pool halls still open. All public activities are not curtailed until October 16<sup>th</sup>!

The Chicago Tribune and other papers report, at its peak, 1200 new cases are being reported each day.

Those within poorer neighborhoods were dying at a faster rate due to overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions and lack of access to doctors. Public notices were not being translated into other languages.

Cook County Hospital had one of the highest mortality rates in the country at 39.8%.

## Final Wave:

The final wave of the pandemic lasts from mid-December to mid-April 1919. Once again the antigen shifted, this time into a less deadly strain, bringing the mortality rated back within the ‘normal’ .02% death rate.

Western states and cities like Oakland, Portland & Phoenix were hit particularly hard. Places like Michigan and Arizona had higher numbers of flu victims than in the second wave.

Australia and France are struck hard by the final wave of influenza. In March 1919 President Woodrow Wilson, while in Paris, contracts the flu, leading to his stroke.

## Aftermath:

The Flu took a tremendous toll on U.S. life expectancy. In 1917 the average life expectancy was 51 years old. In 1918 life expectancy drops an astounding 12 years to 39 years old!

Global estimates range from 80-100 million souls succumbed during the pandemic.

Reportedly 25-30% of the U.S. population contracted the virus between 1918-1919 with an estimated death toll of 675,000.

In the end over 60,000 U.S. soldiers would die from Influenza and the Pneumonia that often followed. More U.S. soldiers died from the disease than combat in 1918.

Other less deadly flu pandemics would follow in 1930, 1957 and 1968, none would be as deadly.

Several doctors and scientists spent the rest of their lives investigating the root cause of the pandemic. Their continued efforts finally discovered the RNA strands H1N1 creating the virus!

Carol Byerly

Paul Lewis

Richard Shope

Kristy Duncan

Johan Hultin

Jeffery K. Taubenberger

## Resources for Tracing Your Pandemic Ancestors

DAY, OCTOBER 19, 1

### U. S. WILL PAY ALL BILLS OF GREAT MORGUE

GOVERNMENT AGENTS TO SETTLE  
ACCOUNTS FOR CONTRACTING  
UNDERTAKERS

That the government will take over and settle all accounts and obligations incurred by reasons of opening up and maintaining the big morgue on Church street, was made known yesterday when H. A. Lampke, an accountant of the Quartermaster Department, was sent to the city to go over all accounts and check up the cost of shipment of approximately 1,000 soldier victims of the influenza plague.

The announcement of the government's intentions was of much interest to the officials of the Chamber of Commerce and others who of their own initiative went ahead and incurred the necessary expenses for fitting up the great morgue, depending upon the future to devise means of taking care of these obligations.

### Print Resources:

#### Historical Societies/Libraries/Archives

- o Local Newspapers (clippings files)
- o County/City Histories
- o Obituary Files
- o Cemetery Indexes
- o Personal Diaries or Letters
- o Photographs
- o School Records/Teacher's Log Books

#### State and County Resources

- o American Legion/VFW Records
- o County Death Registers & Death Certificates
- o Coroner's Inquest Files
- o Public Health Department Reports
- o Hospital Records/Nurses logs/Dr.'s Journals
- o Red Cross Reports and Hospital Records
- o National Guard Files (State Adjutant General or Archives)
- o State Board of Health department files and reports
- o WWI Bonus Files & Discharge Papers

## **Federal Military Resources**

- o War Department Records (R.G. 393 National Archives, D.C.)
- o A.E.F. Casualty Indexes (R.G. 120 National Archives II, MD)
- o Official Military Personnel Files (NPRC, St. Louis)
- o Burial Transfer Cases (NPRC, St. Louis)
- o Camp Newspapers (Library of Congress)
- o WWI Museum Archives and Library (Kansas City)

## **Online Newspaper & Journal Collections**

- The Ancestor Hunt online newspaper collections for Massachusetts  
[www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/massachusetts-online-historical-newspapers-summary](http://www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/massachusetts-online-historical-newspapers-summary)
- Chronicling America <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>
- Internet Archives [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)
- JSTOR [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (available at most universities)

## **Libraries & Special Collections**

- Boston Public Library Digital Collections [www.bpl.org/collections/online](http://www.bpl.org/collections/online)
- Boston Public Library Special Collections [www.bpl.org/research/special/collections.htm](http://www.bpl.org/research/special/collections.htm)
- Illinois Digital Archives [www.idaillinois.org](http://www.idaillinois.org)
- Library of Congress [www.loc.gov/topics/world-war-i](http://www.loc.gov/topics/world-war-i)
- Massachusetts Digital Commonwealth  
[www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search\\_field=all\\_fields&q=Influenza](http://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_field=all_fields&q=Influenza)
- National Archives [www.archives.gov/topics/wwi](http://www.archives.gov/topics/wwi)
- New England Historical Society [www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/the-1918-flu-epidemic-kills-thousands-in-new-england](http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/the-1918-flu-epidemic-kills-thousands-in-new-england)
- University of Michigan Influenza Archive [www.influenzaarchive.org](http://www.influenzaarchive.org)\*\*

## **Museums**

- WWI Museum [www.theworldwar.org/explore/online-collections-database](http://www.theworldwar.org/explore/online-collections-database)
- Fort Devens History Museum [www.fortdevensmuseum.org/history.php](http://www.fortdevensmuseum.org/history.php)
- Pritzker Military Museum and Library: [www.pritzkermilitary.org](http://www.pritzkermilitary.org)

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