

The Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918, by Alan F. Rumrill

As the world, the United States and Cheshire County deal with the current pandemic, it might be comforting to know that we have dealt with a surprisingly similar situation before, and promptly saw life return to normal.

On Saturday September 14, 1918 a granddaughter of Helen Pollard traveled from the Boston area by train to visit her grandmother in Keene. Soon after arriving at the Pollard home on Washington Street, the young girl fell ill and Dr. Weston was called to assist. He diagnosed the illness as a case of the influenza that had been spreading around the globe and had become quite prevalent in Boston. This was Keene's first case of the Spanish flu.

The leaders of the city's government had been watching the spread of the flu and reacted quickly to this report. The Pollard house was immediately quarantined with no one allowed to leave or enter. On September 17 the Keene Sentinel reported that nine members of another family in the city had contracted the flu, presumably by visiting a sick uncle in Quincy, Massachusetts. They were also quarantined, but the epidemic spread rapidly in the area.

City leaders quickly shut down the schools. On September 28 the Keene board of health issued an order closing all pool rooms, barber shops, bowling alleys, club rooms, and movie theaters. Churches and many stores also closed and the residents were urged to avoid public places, isolate themselves, and cover their faces with handkerchiefs when coughing or sneezing.

The Spanish flu probably did not originate in Spain, but that is where it was first widely publicized. Numerous nations were involved in World War I at that time. The war demanded their attention and some countries intentionally avoided mentioning the flu to avoid adding further despair to their residents who were already concerned about the war. Spain was not officially involved in the war and reported on the flu as it took hold in that country. WWI itself exacerbated the spread of the disease as forces from more than 30 countries were sent around the world as part of the conflict, transporting the virus with them.

The spread of pandemic was not as clearly understood 100 years ago as it is today. Furthermore, there were no effective vaccines or antivirals to treat the flu during the epidemic's early stages. Dr. Timothy Leary of Concord soon created a serum from the blood of influenza survivors. Seventy-five people from Keene tried it.



Elliot Community Hospital

A general quarantine was implemented in Keene by October 1, but local cases of the flu continued to increase. A special emergency ward was organized at the Elliot Community Hospital and the beds there were soon full. Consequently, a temporary emergency hospital was set up in

Fiske Hall at Keene Normal School. About twenty-five more patients were admitted there. Dozens of volunteers came forward to assist the exhausted medical professionals.

The surrounding countryside was not immune to the flu's impact. The Sentinel reported that Forest Lake dance pavilion and recreation area in Winchester had been closed to the public. Most local towns suffered losses. Dr. Charles Eastman operated Camp Oahe, a summer camp for girls in Stoddard. He used his family's Sioux background to share Native American skills, practices and heritage with the campers. When the epidemic began the Eastman's daughter Irene was in New York City trying to build a career in acting and singing. She arrived in Stoddard for a visit in mid-October with the news that she had been offered a contract by the New York Metropolitan Opera. She fell ill later the same day and was taken to the hospital in Keene. Five days later she succumbed to the flu and was buried in Sioux fashion in an unmarked grave under a large tree behind her family's home near the shores of Granite Lake. During the peak of the outbreak several dozen new cases were reported daily and on some days several people died. Despite the frightful toll of the outbreak, the worst passed suddenly as the numbers of new cases dropped as quickly as they had increased a few weeks earlier. Churches were allowed to reopen at the beginning of November, school resumed on November 5th, stores opened once again, and the ban on public meetings was lifted.



Irene Eastman

The flu illustrated to the people of Keene the value of modern health measures. A public health officer was appointed and a visiting nurse association was formed. Following a successful fundraising campaign, a modern addition was constructed at the Elliot Community Hospital in 1922. Although more than 1000 cases of the Spanish flu were reported in the area and many families lost family members, the residents of the region



Architect's model of hospital addition

were resilient. They quickly returned to work, returned to school and resumed community life as they tried to re-establish their normal schedules. There are lessons to be learned from the experience of Cheshire County residents a century ago: stay safe, follow the rules, offer to help others, try to remain positive, and this too will pass – hopefully as quickly as it did in 1918.