

Hopkinton Massachusetts 1918: an Earlier Pandemic

In the week of March 29th, 2020 that is during the still rising tide of new Coronavirus cases, I sought solace in the past. This town had gone through an epidemic of Influenza just following the First World War and had come out in one piece at the other end. It must have because we're all here right? Is there anything I can learn from the Hopkinton of 102 years past? How did the officials and residents of our town deal with that particular infection. What kind of a town was it in that year and under those circumstances?

As a librarian with a background in archival studies, I have browsed through Hopkinton's archival resources for quite some time now. From doing my own genealogy over the years I have learned that by uncovering small pieces of information and combining them I can occasionally create a fairly complex and hopefully an interesting story, adding "meat on the bones of the skeleton." I hope to do just that with the little information I have from a library log book and from a 129 page Town Report of 1918. To better understand the individuals who have names in that report I hope to add historical bits of information gleaned from Ancestry.com and from online sources provided by the library's website. With a bit of luck I will present a realistic feel for what the town was like 102 years ago while facing a similarly scary situation.

The so-called *Spanish Flu* of 1918, (it did **not** originate in Spain but rather in China,) was also referred to as the *1918 Flu Pandemic*; a google search will tell you that it is considered one of the most deadly pandemics in human history, killing perhaps ¼ of the world's population according to the American Journal of Epidemiology. The Influenza of 1918 and World War I happened simultaneously and are certainly connected. There were two outbreaks of the 1918 pandemic, the second considered more virulent. In terms of Massachusetts, the second

reappeared in September 2018 at the Boston Navy Yard and at what is now Fort Devons in Ayer specifically killing *young* soldiers. Hopkinton was a town of approximately 2,300 people, (compared to 17,800 in 2019) and if I can look closely at a handful of individuals from our town it might illuminate the past and make our current situation seem less novel and frightening.

Apparently the influenza virus reached Hopkinton in September; the sole librarian Caroline Wilbur recorded some details about the library's reaction to the outbreak. The library was closed for nearly three weeks and books were not loaned to persons who had the illness... "books are not allowed to go where there are cases." The library was fumigated and I have to wonder what type of cleaning agents were used at that time, would they be dangerous by today's standards? (For example arsenic was at one time used to control weeds in Lake Maspenock, children refrained from swimming for a short time period!) Also in 1918, one of the town's druggists was paid \$22.00 for creating an *anti-toxin*. Wilbur indicated that books returned to the library by *known* sick persons were also "fumigated" and thank goodness, out of compassion, all fines, 2 cents per day, were forgiven. She spoke of the illness with no emotion like that of a polished library professional. She offered no thoughts, feelings or opinions regarding the illness in our small town; in the logbook she abruptly changed the subject from the epidemic to a more positive note, a patron was providing English history information for the library. I wonder how it was known which citizens had the illness and which did not, an issue we are faced with this April of 2020.

The *Annual Report of the Town of Hopkinton* provides a potentially expanded view of events. We have to remember that the *War to End All Wars* was in its final year; Hopkinton sent 111 young men and three had died. The increase in international travel due to the dreadful

war of trenches and toxins certainly had a significant role in the spread of the virus. The *Report* tells us that two individuals died from Influenza, however I had to consider the Town Clerk Patrick Dolan's recordings that also listed seven people dying of pneumonia; I question how in 1918 they were able to tell the difference between the flu and pneumonia. Like April 1 2020, we still don't know necessarily who has it, or who **did** have it based on insufficient testing. No where did I come across references to testing for the virus.

Of interest are other non-Influenza statistics as well. Life was hard; 52 people were buried in the town that year, six children under 5 years of age! People also died of "Monstrosity", (1) "Cerebral Gumma," (this turns out to be related syphilis,) (1) and "Carcinoma of the Uterus," (2.) What was "Aortic Regurgitation of the Heart?.." That killed one Hopkinton resident. Quite obviously times were tough and people's lives were much more at risk than ours are today in spite of Covid19. It appears the town had a novel virus in addition to all the other frightening conditions/diseases and disorders. The *Deaths by Months* section on page 9 of the Town Report indicates that deaths increased in November and December, *after* Influenza died down. People faced death regardless of the new infection. Children were especially vulnerable; this was something that became evident and stunned me while I was adding information to a library spreadsheet listing cemetery records. This was only 102 years ago and it was not uncommon for children to die, three under age five died the following year in 1919.

The Flu was handled as it is now by Hopkinton's *Board of Health*. The report tells us that two members of the three had to be appointed temporarily because of a two-seat vacancy, a bad time to be lacking board members. The newly appointed were Martin Danahy and Roswell I. Frail, both well known Hopkinton family names over time. (Frail was also paid \$25.00 the next

year for winding the town's clock!) Their temporary terms expired in March of 1919 a few months after the epidemic died down. Roswell was also a town employee in the capacity of a "Fence Viewer." He must have been an inspector of town fences?! The third member was E. Frank Morse. Of incidental interest were the number of police officers, 14 and of note are outdated town jobs, "Person to Cut Wires in Case Of Fire," of which there were three. Electric lights were still coming to the town, additional lighting was being requested for Nebraska Street for example.

Also it is interesting to note that the town was responsible for the most vulnerable or economically disadvantaged, there were Poor Farms in the town and there was a board of *Overseers of the Poor*. The town was attempting to eliminate that board, (it was listed as a warrant on the town's election,) in order to have the Board of Selectmen handle the dependent population. (As always as in 2020, trying to trim budgets.) Some of the impoverished came from outside of Hopkinton and were then reimbursed from other localities. \$3,000. was appropriated for an annual expense, There was a vote at Town Meeting to sell the "Town Farm" perhaps this was one of the Poor Farms? Hopkinton had two I believe over the years.

A large part of the Town Report 1918 dealt with WW1, Public Safety committees engaged in war activities and the local Red Cross was sited. After paragraphs of patriotic rhetoric, discussion in the report abruptly and seemingly out of context shifts to a paragraph referring to the Flu. "During the latter part of the year a large number of our citizens were stricken by the epidemic, Spanish Influenza, the Board of Health had to take extraordinary measures to relieve suffering and prevent the spread of the disease." There are no specific details in this paragraph but it noted that The Board of Health's account went over budget by \$625.00. My initial

impression was that this was just another event happening in the town during that year. As with our Librarian Miss Wilbur, there is no emotion indicated, no expansion of opinion or thoughts about the epidemic. It simply happened. Maybe the town just didn't want to dwell on the illness, some reading I came across suggest that this was an American attitude, explaining why it has been "historically neglected." Or perhaps Town Reports were not a vehicle for expressing such feelings or emotions related to potential death and dying.

Page 48 and 49 are Board of Health expenses and here we might uncover some details of interest relating to the Influenza, although the word *flu* or *Influenza* is never listed, only "expenses over 2018." G.S. Thompson, W.T. Crockett and Walter E. Day, (a pharmacist, as I have seen advertisements for his business on Main Street,) were paid by the town as "fumigators." These would have been the men who arrived at the library to sanitize the area known as "the stacks," now, (in 2020) that area in the main lobby located behind the circulation desk. A man named Michael Collins and a John Curran also were being supported by the town by paying the city of Cambridge fairly large amounts of money dispersed throughout the year. Perhaps they were being hospitalized for the flu and the town was reimbursing the hospital? A married couple? Merton Nourse and Dorothy Nourse were being "cared" for by the City of Boston, perhaps this is care from a hospital or a Boston facility or institution of some type? What is evident is that the town was responsible for the financial support of its ill citizens.

A point of interest involves the payment by the town to individuals in "quarantine." This is the role our federal government has currently undertaken. Hopkinton paid "wages" for several individuals during quarantine. The names are as follows and these people will be researched by Ancestry.com so I can add meat to the story of Spanish Influenza in our town: John Sellar,

Walter F Kimball, X.J. Rollins, C.N. Linnell, Bernice Sweet, Angelo Cardesso and Harry Hamilton, all were paid a single sum of money, generally \$22-24 per payment although Cardesso and Hamilton received \$58 and \$60 each.

Let us get to know some of these old time “**Quarantined**” Hopkinton residents. No netflix for them, no video chats or home deliveries!

John Sellar: Came to the United States in 1906 at age 19 from Scotland and was naturalized in 1918, the year of the Flu. He married a Mary Hooker when he was 23 and had four children with her. He was about 31 in 1918 and likely lived at # 23 Grove Street as that is his location in the 1920 Federal Census owning his own home. He worked as a machinist and ultimately survived the epidemic as he can be found in later years, eventually moving to Marlborough.

X. J. Rollins: Might be someone called *Clay* Rollins. There were several Rollins families living side by side, all brothers I think, on Wood Street in Hopkinton’s Woodville. He too lived on beyond The Flu.

Calvin N. Linnell: Lived directly across the Street from where I have lived for 24 years at 55 Pleasant Street! That building was a tiny gable-end mill worker’s home that was torn down several years ago. Although American he was married to a Swedish immigrant. (Another statistic kept by the town was whether children were born to people of *native* or *foreign* parents.) Calvin was about 64 at the time of the “Spanish Flu.” He was a machinist at a boiler works. The man lived on and can be found in 1920 in the same place!

Bernice Sweet: She was also a Grove Street resident, living at # 61. She was married in 1913 and was listed as a "clerk." She was 25 in 1918, a dangerous age as that epidemic was more lethal with younger individuals. She too continued on as I located her in Brookline in 1944.

Angelo Cardesso: Angelo Had Milford ties, his parents were Italian born and living in Milford at the time. He is listed as being a mason in 1910, probably cutting and working with the beautiful Milford Pink granite. He too survived.

Harry Hamilton: Born around 1887, Harry's mother was Effie and he was a Hopkinton carpenter who married at age 23 in 1913. His wife was Ruby Phipps, a prominent family name found in Hopkinton in large numbers. In later records he is found as a *self-employed* carpenter again living on Grove Street at number 20. I know he did not succumb to the flu as he is later found registering for WWII draft, at age 55. He had no telephone in 1942 and lists a family member as living on Mayhew Street. He is another example of a Grove Street resident living under quarantine.

Michael Collins: Supported financially by the town during 1918. Unfortunately there are at least 3 or 4 people with the identical name found in Hopkinton. Common names make for confusion and research errors, don't follow the wrong individual through the records! At least 2 of the Michael Collins were born in Ireland, one had a Civil War connection, (too old.) At least one was a bootmaker in this Bootmaking town of the past. One did die in 1919, maybe that's our guy who the town was supporting away from home.

Merton and Dorothy Nourse: Interesting here! Both were financially supported but the money went to the city of Boston. This was not an aging couple, my first impression based on their old fashioned names, but brother and sister ages about 5 and 9 years of age. Eight years earlier In 1910 they were living with parents Ernest and Grace on Mayhew Street in our town center. What occurred between 1910 and 1918? I'm thinking father Ernest M. Died. Were they in some kind of institution? A charitable institution that specifically aided children was *New England Home For Little Wanderers* and was up and running at that time I believe. Their lives may or may not have been impacted by Influenza, they both survive and can be found living together as late as 1940's when Merton enlisted in the military. In the Depression era of 1934 they no longer have a Hopkinton connection and Merton is working as an elevator operator in Roxbury. Incidentally he was a small man, 5' 6" and weighing 124 at the time that he enlisted in the military.

Frances J. Hilditch: This young woman born in 1898 was paid \$20 by the town for "nursing" In 1918. If so, she would have been only 16 or 17 at the time of the epidemic. I located her with little trouble as she has the middle initial J. I found her two years after the Flu relocated to Newport R.I. working and boarding as a nurse at Newport Hospital. Perhaps she started her nursing career during that difficult time and continued with that career. In 1924 she married in Ashland at age 26.

I searched newspapers online (an extension of Ancestry.com) using keywords *Hopkinton* and *Flu* or *Influenza* finding a handful of records. There were two certain fatalities attributed to that flu both young men associated with the military and WW1. I also browsed through obituaries of

the town during that year and discovered that cause of death was almost never referred to. One would need a death certificate to determine the cause. (Next step perhaps?)

However Stanley McIntyre of Pleasant Street aged 22, (McIntyres **still** live on Pleasant Street!,) likely died of the flu; the more lengthy obit indicates that he was “the last Hopkinton young man to enter the service” died at Camp Andrew. McIntyre was buried at Mount Auburn. Looking closely at individuals makes this all real. Like many other young men of that time he contracted the disease at a training camp for WW1 soldiers. Of coincidence or not, a **John S.** McIntyre age 22 also of our town died but specifically in the war, I am not sure of their relationship and whether or not they are related.

A second young man named Stephen H. Pond had parents who formerly of Somerville retired to the bucolic location of Hopkinton. His father was a former Fire Captain in that city. Stephen died at Fort Devons in Ayer and his cause of death was stated as Influenza. The Ponds remained in our town for some time following the premature death of their son.

What we can deduce from these bits of gleaned information? Hopkinton found itself in a remarkable time due to the winding down of the Great War. In the Town Reports there was a lot of language dedicated to discussing the war effort at home; donations to the Red Cross, several war committees being formed and by 1919, parades, banquets, dances held at Town Hall, memorials and awards to those who served. Tremendous rhetoric, (jingoism?) was devoted to the war. On page 43 of the Town Report : “The selectmen take this opportunity of thanking all the citizens who served on the several committees engaged in war activities for the splendid work they did in keeping Hopkinton in the front ranks of endeavor.”

Behind the hoopla was a second kind of a battle; the severity of which is not documented in the Hopkinton records but rather in the Boston Globe and the Boston Post that list some staggering death statistics. An article I read, *The Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919* from American Decades published on Gale suggested that 85,000 people had contracted the disease in Massachusetts. Did Hopkinton citizens and town officials have their heads in the sand? Was it simply too awful to write about? There were no warnings or health recommendations made that I was unable to uncover. In contrast the Boston Post listed a "Rules to Avoid Respiratory Disease", by the U.S. Surgeon General in nutshell: keep clean, don't share unwashed plates and utensils, breathe through your nose, open the windows and avoid tight clothes and chew your food well! A Hopkinton or Milford newspaper might prove useful here but I did not have access to those resources. The Town Report merely states on page 44: "A large part of our citizens were stricken by the epidemic Spanish Influenza. The Board of Health had to take extraordinary measures to relieve suffering and prevent the spread of the disease."

What we do know is that at **least** two young men died both victims because of their WWI exposure to the illness. There could not have been testing and it is likely that the seven people listed as dying from pneumonia were also Influenza victims. In addition, a 16 year old girl was paid by Hopkinton for "nursing," six people were paid to remain in quarantine, at least three living in households on Grove Street. Schools were closed from September 22 through October 23 as was the Public Library. Druggists were paid to "fumigate" and according to Caroline Wilbur the librarian, it was known who had the disease as books were not loaned to *those* individuals.

Hopkinton town officials allocated funds to people who were likely financially insecure due to being quarantined and in addition supported about five people who were situated outside of the town. The residents faced many health concerns; by 1920 at least two Hopkintonians were found in sanatoriums and still supported by the town. These may have been people sick with tuberculosis which was also a serious health issue of the day. Unrelated to flu, babies (children under 5,) died in Hopkinton, six that year and three the following year. People who were quarantined were likely bored and anxious in varying degrees as we all are in 2020. Two Board of Health members resigned in 1919 and we cannot know why. Unlike today, death and illness were not necessarily unusual occurrences in the town of 2,450. We can only imagine reactions and attitudes towards the disease as they became overshadowed by World War I and attitudes towards that global situation. They made it okay and so will we.

By 1919 the Influenza epidemic disappeared. There is no mention of it in Hopkinton's Town Report other than one woman being paid while in quarantine. There are parades, banquets and celebrations for the boys who fought but there is no local celebration for the end of the epidemic in the world and in the country. Perhaps they just collectively let out a sigh of relief.

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Information courtesy of Hopkinton Public Library and Hopkinton Historical Society

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