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## 1918 Influenza pandemic strikes home, with local cases and military victims

By WARREN D. HUSE, for The Laconia Daily Sun  
Apr 10, 2020

*Part 2 of a series.*

LACONIA — By late September 1918, *The Laconia Democrat* had reported that even the war news had “been overshadowed this week by the Great Spanish Influenza Epidemic.”

The local Committee on Public Safety had called for closing the public schools, library, theaters, churches, other gatherings and meetings.

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This was World War I time and, by then, Laconia had 376 men in military service.

Camp Devens, in Ayer, Mass., was particularly hard hit by the pandemic, where many of the city's soldiers were in basic training.

One of them, Wilfred Chabot, died, Sept. 23, 1918, after a few days' illness with pneumonia.

In Late September, Albert Cyril Minnon, 27, died at Camp Upton, Long Island and B. Lewis Paige, 20, a Navy reservist, died at the Naval Hospital in Chelsea, Mass.

Then, during October 1918, an estimated 195,000 Americans died from the H1N1 virus, as "Spanish Influenza" was also known.

In Laconia, word was received that Herbert W. Blackstone, 23, of The Weirs, radio gunner on the United States Ship Sterling, had died of pneumonia, Oct. 12, at Charleston, S.C. He was a 1913 graduate of Laconia High School and had served in the Merchant Marine for four years before being called into active service with the Naval Reserve in July 1917.

As of mid-October, however, the Board of Health was "convinced that the epidemic of Spanish influenza is now under control to such an extent that it will be safe to remove the ban on public gatherings."

Consequently, "they have granted permission for church services to be held Sunday as usual, the Laconia public schools will open Monday, and moving pictures and fraternal organizations may resume their gatherings next week. "

There were "still quite a large number of people sick in the Lake city, but very few new cases have been reported during the past few days and it is thought that the danger is practically over."



A week later, when the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign opened, “in the midst of the influenza epidemic,” Laconia’s quota of \$540,000 “looked large, but the quota was pledged during the second week of the campaign, and when the books closed, the subscriptions totaled \$708,000, or \$168,000 over the mark.”

(In the four Liberty Bond campaigns of 1917 and 1918, city residents had purchased a total of \$2,238,850.)

Meanwhile, the city had also been asked to raise \$28,000 during the United War Work Drive, for the benefit of seven organizations, “engaged in war service of great importance,” headed by the YMCA.

World War I was still raging, across the Atlantic, pandemic or not.

Late in October 1918, Dr. W.H. True of the Board of Health reported that the recent epidemic had seen approximately 2,394 cases in Laconia, 179 of which had been treated without a physician by the district nurse.

There had been 268 case of pneumonia and 109 deaths.

True recommended that the pest house on Garfield street “be sold and a quarantine hospital built on the grounds of the Laconia hospital for use in such emergencies.”

But the continuing effects of the pandemic were far from over.

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*Note: Information about the 1918 pandemic was taken from “The Deadliest Flu: The Complete Story of the Discovery and Reconstruction of the 1918 Pandemic Virus,” available on-line at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://tinyurl.com/stqg3tr>) and from the CDC’s “1918 Pandemic Influenza Historic Timeline” (<https://tinyurl.com/y83bp7od>).*

*The local references were taken from the microfilm files of The Laconia Democrat at the Laconia Public Library.*