Eastern North Carolina & the 1918 Influenza Epidemic

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The Exhibit

- Laupus Library, Fall 2018
- Joyner Library, Spring 2019
- Wake Tech, Fall 2019
- Story Map, Ongoing
Research and Sources

- Ongoing Research Project
- History Collections Resources
- The Country Doctor Museum Artifacts
- Joyner Library Manuscript Collections
- North Carolina Collection Microfilmed Newspapers
- Digital NC
- Dan Shingleton

Presentation Outline

• Overview and the Influenza Virus
• The Experience in Eastern NC
  • Timing
  • The Role of Newspapers
  • The Red Cross and Public Activism
  • Treatment
  • Case Studies
• Aftermath

Image Credit: A street car conductor keeps a passenger from boarding without a mask, Seattle 1918. The National Archives.
Overview & The Influenza Virus
The War and Influenza

- 1918 was the final year of the war
- Every community in NC was infected
- More people died from the flu than in the war
- At least 20 million people died worldwide, 1 million North Carolinians were infected
Origins of the Virus

- Mutation Location is Uncertain
- "Spanish Influenza"
- Haskell County, Kansas
The Virus

• Lethal Strain

• Bird Influenza and Human Influenza

• Virus Discovered in 2005

Electron micrograph of the 1918 influenza virus.

Photo Credit: Cynthia Goldsmith
Content Providers: CDC/ Dr. Terrence Tumpey
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Image Library
The Symptoms

Typical Flu Symptoms

• Body Aches
• Coughing
• Chills
• Fever

Additional Symptoms in 1918

• Pneumonia
• Turning Blue

Image Credit: A nurse wears a mask to protect herself from influenza. The National Archives.
“The chief symptoms which I can personally verify were a rapid, progressive feeling of weakness, aching, cough, chills and fever. Within an hour or so it was for one to become bedridden and nursed by terrified members of one’s family. In many cases, every member of a family would develop the disease eventually, where as in other families, one or two members seemed immune to the virulent flu.”

Dr. Robert Fales, Wilmington, NC Physician
3 Waves

1st
SPRING 1918
LOW DEATH RATE

2nd
FALL 1918
HIGHEST DEATH RATE

3rd
WINTER 1918- EARLY SPRING 1919
MANY REPORTED CASES BUT FEWER DEATHS THAN THE SECOND WAVE

The Case Studies Will Focus on this Wave
Arrival in North Carolina

- Wilmington on September 19, 1918
- Charlotte in late September 1918
- Most of the state was affected by early October
- The University of North Carolina

The Experience in Eastern North Carolina
Timing

• World War I meant a shortage of doctors on the Homefront

• Dr. Cecil Garrenton and Bethel Citizens
Public Fear and the Role of Newspapers

• Local newspapers spread the word about:
  • Symptoms
  • Number of local cases
  • Quarantines
  • Other closures

• Local papers also published State Board of Health statements
The Farmville Enterprise

Spanish Influenza

The Tobacco Market Will Be Open Thursday—Closed Friday

Wilson Has Shown No Signs Of Weakness But Given Huns Severe Jolt

The Enemy Must Withdraw Says Pres. Wilson Before Allies Will Consider Any Peace Terms. And The Allies Continue To Keep The Hun’s On The Run

When You Fight—Fight
The Red Cross

• Localized relief

• M.K.B., Morehead City

• Committee Chapter on Influenza

“A mass meeting was held in the Red Cross rooms where we organized for work. The town was divided into districts, each district having a committee to make house calls...I was on duty nearly twenty hours a day, the first three days after my arrival, and from fourteen to eighteen thereafter, only going off duty when I could no longer stand...From the beginning, the physicians... the volunteer nurses and I, wore face masks, made and furnished free by the Red Cross.”

M.K.B., Red Cross Nurse serving in Morehead City, NC

The American Journal of Nursing, May 1919
Public Activism

• Community Members rose to the Occasion

• Soup Kitchens

• Plymouth, N.C. Example

“I have been delivering soups for the last two weeks to the sick, those that have no one to wait on them. We have a soup kitchen down town. Make beef and chicken soup, boiled custard, chicken salad, lemon cream, and sandwiches. In some homes every member of the family would be down with it. In others, two three and four would be sick. We carry things all around town and as far as ten miles out in the country.”

Mammie, Plymouth, NC, October 23, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #381
Treatment and Care

• Quarantines and Fresh Air
• City-wide Quarantines
• Newspapers

Kinston Daily Free Press, October 11, 1918.
“I believe in staying in five days after you think you are well, and have sunshine and air in your room.”

Maria Whitehurst, New Bern, NC, October 28, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #617

“Great emphasis was placed on the need of fresh air, cleanliness, and nursing care, in every home that I entered.”

M.K.B., Red Cross Nurse serving in Morehead City, NC
The American Journal of Nursing, May 1919
Treatment and Care

- Attempts to ease the suffering of patients
- Pain medication
  - Aspirin and Morphine
- Controlling Coughing
  - Codeine and Heroin
- Stimulants
  - Atrophine and Strychnine
- Vaccines and Quinine
- Gelsemium
- Self Prescribed
USE OF ALCOHOL QUESTIONABLE.

The Free Press does not regard the tendency to let down the anti-liquor laws in the fight against influenza very favorably. Any latitude that is given the health officers will certainly be taken advantage of by some unscrupulous persons. A large part of the medical fraternity is now agreed that alcohol is not a stimulant and is not necessary for medicinal purposes. The Free Press ventures the prediction that the percentage of recoveries where alcohol is not used will be greater than where it is employed and it is a well established fact that those who are addicted to alcoholism are most susceptible to the ravages of pneumonia.
“I am not taking aspirine, [sic] now I take every night—5 grams quinine & an asafetida pill. Sadie is taking aspirine [sic] and quinine. I haven’t been out anywhere since ‘flu’ started. I thought best to stay at home…”

Maria Whitehurst, New Bern, NC, October 15, 1918

Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #617

“I am taking castor oil and spraying our throats. I do [hope] we will escape it, for I don’t know what on earth we would do if I should have it.”

Mrs. Raby, Leggett, NC, October 14, 1918

Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #317
Case Studies
Rocky Mount

- Mrs. Raby, wife of a local doctor
- Wrote to her husband about Leggett and Rocky Mount
- In six days, the number of flu cases more than doubled (400 to 900)
- Churches became hospitals and stores closed
"The epidemic here is terrible... There are 900 cases in Rocky Mount. Every nurse in the Edgecombe Hospital has it but two. They are begging for volunteers to go there to help nurse. In Rocky Mount the churches are being turned into hospitals. Never before have I known such an awful epidemic in this country... The people who have died that I have heard of only lived from two to four days after being taken."

Mrs. Raby, Leggett, NC, October 8, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #317
New Bern

- September 30: Churches, Schools, Theaters, and the Library Close
- October 9: Less than 100 cases documented
- October 14: Tobacco Warehouses and the Cotton Exchange Close. Circus not allowed to perform.
- 1918 was an election and year and the flu interfered with the campaign
“You can’t hear anything but war and influenza. Every morning when I read the paper I have the ‘blues’ for a while. There are always some deaths of some one you know of, if you don’t know them... The churches, schools, movies have all been closed for two weeks & tobacco ware houses were ordered closed this week. The circus was not allowed to show here after it came. So they went on to Washington N.C.”

Maria Whitehurst, to her son, Harold Whitehurst, New Bern, NC, October 15, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #617
“My boy, you don’t seem to know the danger of this influenza. Please stay in bed, you will have pneumonia. I am worried to death about you... People are dying in every direction of the town. If I had known you were going on the trip you did, I should have advised you not to go... Especially at such a time as this. I should have thought you would have known better... Stay in, don’t go among people.”

Maria Whitehurst, to her son, Harold Whitehurst, New Bern, NC, October 21, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #617
New Bern

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October 1: Flu first appears as “Grippe”
October 5: Papers claim nothing will close
October 7: 300 cases of the flu in Kinston
October 10: “Enforced Holiday”
October 18: Dr. Mitchener asks for another week of Quarantine

Kinston
“‘Flu’ has struck our town. Several cases have been reported. I advise people to let the other fellow go to the circus for them, and the picture shows and public meetings in general as well. Help the other fellow by covering your cough and sneeze. You may be a carrier or have it in the early stages.”

Dr. J. S. Michener, Head of the Health Department in Kinson, October 1, 1918
Kinston Daily Free Press, Joyner Library Microfilm Collection
“It is criminal to spit or sneeze promiscuously. It is criminal because principally by these means the disease is spread. Sometimes the Spanish influenza kills.”
Kinston

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- October 5: Papers claim nothing will close
- October 7: 300 cases of the flu in Kinston
- October 10: “Enforced Holiday”
- October 18: Dr. Mitchener asks for another week of Quarantine
HUNDREDS OF CASES OF INFLUENZA HERE AND NUMBER GROWS

Unofficial Reports Tend to Make Situation More Serious

DEATHS ARE VERY FEW

Action by Authorities—Tendency to Postpone Court Weekend Brings Increase in Patients—Bad in Country

ENFORCED HOLIDAY HERE WITH PUBLIC PLACES CLOSED UP

Mitchener Will Try to Get the Soda Fountains Included

NOT MUCH IMPROVEMENT

Although Number of Convalescents Reduces Influenza's Score Somewhat—Better Suspension Than Funerals

MITCHENER TO ASK HEALTH BOARD TO EXTEND QUARANTINE

Wants at Least Another Week of Suspension Order, Says

PROTECT THE WORKERS

Public Doctor Would Keep Hundreds From Going to Tasks Too Soon—Situation is Still Clearing Up
Coastal Plain Fair

• Planned to be held in Tarboro on October 29, 30, 31, and November 1, 1918

• Speculation about whether it would occur circulated in the local papers for a month.

• Canceled on October 25

“We are getting ready now for the Big Fair in Tarboro, but are not sure yet if they will have it on account of this epidemic all over the state. They have cut out most all of them in the state.”

M. Heilbroner, Tarboro, NC, October 15, 1918
Joyner Library Manuscript Collection #317
Aftermath
Death Toll

- At least 20 million worldwide
- Over 13,000 North Carolinians
- Deaths per County Map

Image Credit: Data collected by author from NC Mortality Statistics. Map created by Sara Mackenzie Parkin.
Rural Health

• Needed more health care support in rural areas
• “…that rural health be provided for by an appropriation” from the state and the federal government.
• Dr. Watson S. Rankin testified before Congress
• Rural Health Act passes, NC receives $50,000 for rural sanitation

Image Credit: “Rural Sanitation,” Miscellaneous Hearings Before the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives.
Recognizing The Value of Public Health

• Transactions of the Medical Society of North Carolina
• Reports on how the epidemic affected their population
• Dr. C.V. Reynolds of Asheville
• Wilson County Health Department

“...the epidemic of influenza has been the most potent factor in popularizing the work of our department...”
Preventing Another Epidemic

- The Health Bulletin
- Newspapers
- Health Departments

Public Health System Improvements

• Petitions

• Funding Increases

• 1920 NC State Board of Health Budget

• Public Health Nursing

Hospitals

- Dr. Charles O’Hagan Laughinghouse
- “Hospital For Pitt Imperative”

Throughout the 1920s, new hospitals were built across the state.
Conclusion

• The Flu Today

• A Universal Vaccine?

• Flu Clinic at Laupus, October 30th, 9am – 1pm

Image Credit: CDC website.
History Collections Primary Sources

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