

*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the exhibition of the Sisters of the Holy Family, Columbus, Queen of Angels, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Sisters of Notre Dame and the Epidemic of 1918

One of the first influenza patients at Fort Devens Hospital in Massachusetts. Though the doctor and nurse wore masks, they offered no protection from the disease.

Image from [http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/documents\\_media/photographs/index.html](http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/documents_media/photographs/index.html)



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—In [March of 2013](#), I wrote about the terrible Influenza pandemic that circled the world from 1918 to 1919. When the epidemic struck in Boston in 1918, the Sisters of Notre Dame joined many others in helping care for the sick. Records indicate that at least one third of the world's population became infected and more than 50 million died worldwide. And with WWI killing another 37 million, it must have felt like the world was ending. In the U.S. alone, over 675,000 people died. Mortality rates were exceptionally high for people between the ages of 20 and 40 years old.

The crisis began in Boston on August 27, 1918 when a ship came into port bringing several sick sailors. Two days later, on August 29th, 58 cases of influenza were reported. The sick men were sent to the Chelsea Naval Hospital and from there, the disease spread like wildfire. On September 6th, the *Boston Globe* first reported on the outbreak of the 'grippe', and the measures people needed to take to protect themselves. Unlike the flu that we are familiar with today, the 1918 strain of influenza targeted otherwise healthy young people, especially children.

The *Boston Globe* began a daily report on the number of deaths. On September 14th, 21 people died in the city. By September 28th, that number climbed to 152. Despite the alarming rise in fatalities, it took until September 26th before cities and towns ordered the closing of schools and other public buildings in an effort to contain the disease. On October 1st, there were 202 reported deaths in Boston, so many that were not enough coffins to bury the dead. In other cities and towns, those statistics were just as grim. By the end of October, approximately 4000 Boston residents had died. And in January of 1919 approximately 45,000 people were reported to have succumbed to the disease in the state of Massachusetts.

Such desperate times required desperate measures. Because physicians and hospitals were overwhelmed with the sick, and because the health department needed to keep the afflicted isolated from the general public, temporary hospitals were set up. Cardinal O'Connell called for volunteers from the teaching orders to assist with the care of the sick. In response, Sr. Mary Borgia, the Eastern Provincial for the U.S., gave permission for the Sisters of Notre Dame to help.

In the heart of the pandemic, the Sisters of St. Augustine's School in South Boston reported that "*Sisters Imelda, Helen Josephine, Catherine Francis, Marie of the Cross, Ellen of St. John and Augustine Marie don masks, aprons and white veils before going forth on their errand of Mercy.*" They went to the homes of those who could not afford physicians. "*And what dirt and filth and distress was awaiting them. Poverty and his accompanying miseries met them at every turn. There were no sheets, no toilets, no means of caring for the afflicted in numerous so-called homes. Sometimes the Sisters had to return to the convent to procure these necessities. In some families even sheets, curtains, etc. were entirely lacking, and the dirt, the accumulation of months, had to be removed before any really beneficial help could be given.*" Their work went on for several weeks, ultimately claiming Sr. Ellen of St. John as one of the victims of the pandemic.

In Lowell, the sisters began their work on October 10th, finding the same conditions as those in Boston. *"In many places they found great destitution. In some families they were four or five in bed and nobody to look after them. The neighbors were so afraid of contagion that they did not go near them. Many died for want of care."*

Towns outside of Boston and Lowell were affected by the disease as well. Peabody, Salem and Andover all reported in their Annals of the arrival of the terrible disease. In Peabody they wrote, *"While there were many cases in our city, they were not so severe as elsewhere and though we offered our services to the Board of Health, it was decided we should remain at home and prepare custards and broths for the sick. The dishes and materials were supplied and each day an auto came and carried away for distribution among the sufferers the dainties that were prepared."*

In Andover, the sisters went out every day for a few hours to tend those in their parish. And in Salem, the sisters went to Salem Hospital and the temporary shelter erected for the sick on Loring Avenue.

The sisters from the St. Mary's convent in Lawrence, MA assisted at the Base Hospital set up on Emery Hill. Between nine to twelve sisters went to the hospital every day between October 8th to the 27th to help in any way possible. They also set up a canteen beside their convent to provide food for needy families. Their report stated they gave out food to between 25 to 30 families every day.

Though public buildings like theaters reopened by October 20th, the epidemic wasn't over. It continued through the winter, easing up only with the spring of 1919. Boston was one of the worst hit areas in the nation. Only Philadelphia and Pittsburgh experienced a higher mortality rate than Boston. Because of that, the public's response to those who placed themselves in danger by caring for the sick was overwhelming. Reports on the Sisters of Notre Dame's work, along with others, were forwarded to the Massachusetts State House and letters, like the one to the right, were sent to the sisters to thank them for all they did during one of the worst pandemics in history.

Letter from Major Charles Durant sent to the Sisters of Notre Dame in Lawrence, thanking them and others religious sisters for their work in caring for influenza patients at Camp Emery.

HEADQUARTERS EMERGENCY HOSPITAL  
MASSACHUSETTS STATE GUARD  
CAMP EMERY - LAWRENCE

Lawrence, Mass.  
October 30th, 1918.

From Camp Commander, Camp Emery,  
To Rev. James T. O'Reilly.

Subject: Sisters' Services at Camp Emery.

1. I wish to thank the Sisters of the various Orders of Lawrence for their invaluable services at the Influenza Hospital. Their presence and influence here acted as an inspiration. I may say that the success of the nursing and care of the patients at Camp Emery was very largely dependent upon them.

2. I wish also to thank you personally for your enthusiastic co-operation in our work.

Charles E. Durant,  
Charles E. Durant,  
Major M.C., M.D.G.  
Camp Commander.

### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ <http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/index.html>
- ◆ <http://www.influenzaarchive.org/>
- ◆ [digitalcommonwealth.org](http://digitalcommonwealth.org)
- ◆ E Street Convent Annals, 1903-1927.
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- ◆ NDA Annals, Fenway, Boston, 1917-1936.
- ◆ Andover Convent Annals, 1914-1972.
- ◆ Salem Convent Annals, 1878-1971.
- ◆ St. John's, Peabody Convent Annals, 1912-1943.
- ◆ St. Mary's, Cambridge Convent Annals, 1876-1919.
- ◆ St. Mary's Convent, Lawrence Annals, 1911-1923.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-1980.