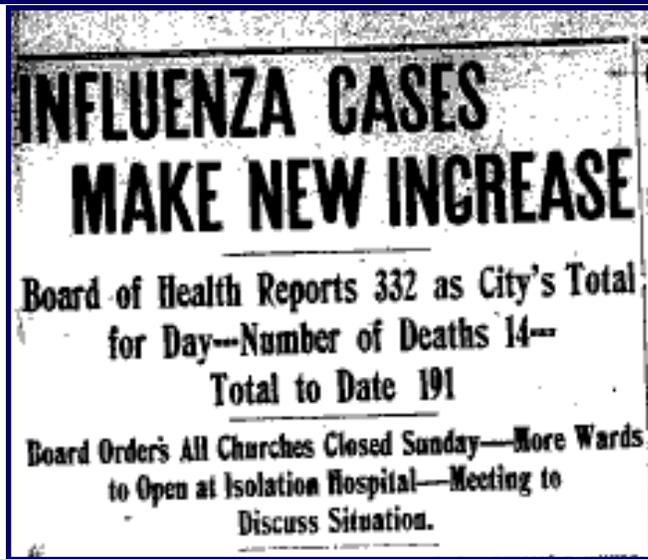


The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the Annals of the Sisters of Notre Dame,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

Annals from the Archives

“Four or Five in a Bed and No One To Look After Them” The Pandemic of 1918 in Lowell, Massachusetts

From the Lowell Sun,
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—As we near the 100th anniversary of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, it's important to remember just how much things have changed. While influenza still kills hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, our understanding of the virus has improved and allowed the development of various vaccines to help those most vulnerable to its effects. What made the influenza pandemic in 1918 unusually terrible was the incredibly high mortality rate for those between the ages 20 and 50. It was so virulent that there were numerous instances of people dying less than twenty-four hours after their symptoms first developed. To this day no one knows why that particular strain was so deadly.

As I wrote before in the [March 2013](#) and [October 2015](#) Annals from the Archives, when Massachusetts closed all public buildings from the end of September to the end of October to prevent the spread of the disease, the Sisters of Notre Dame were among many who stepped forward to help. They worked tirelessly to tend to those stricken by that terrible epidemic. Though all the Annals kept by the sisters in affected communities reported on their work, the sisters at the St. Patrick's Convent in Lowell took the extra step of partnering with the League of Catholic Women and the St. Patrick's Ladies Aid Society to minister to the numerous people stricken by the disease in their city. In 1918, the population of Lowell hovered around 112,000. Many of those who relied on employment from the textile mills lived in crowded tenements—ripe conditions for the spread of disease.

The sisters in Lowell began making daily rounds to the sick on October 10th and continued those calls until October 26th. They visited on average 50 families a day during the worst of the crisis. In their Annals, they described the first step—creating the costumes they would need for the work—“long white aprons to cover the entire habit. White sleeves gathered at the wrists, a white bonnet, and white veils. [They] wore their cloaks but took them off before going into the sick room and put them in a large bag which they brought for that purpose.” The sisters wrote of the conditions they encountered, “In many places they found great destitution. In some families there were four or five in a bed and nobody to look after them. The neighbors were so afraid of contagion that they did not go near them. Many died from want of care.”

As if things weren't bad enough, there was still a war in Europe and because of it, food prices had risen anywhere from 25% to 50%. In addition, coal was so scarce that, “the government has forbidden fires to be lit in schools and public buildings. . . on account of the shortage of coal.” On September 30th, just after the Commonwealth had ordered all public buildings closed, the sisters reported that, “At half past 3:00 PM . . . the ringing of bells, blowing of horns and whistles announced that the Bulgarians had surrendered.” Because the Bulgarians were allies of Germany, this news signaled the beginning of the end of the war and brought a glimmer of light into those times. But that news could not help with the cost of food as the sisters wrote that, “everything in the line of food is very high. Eggs are 85 cents per dozen, milk \$.13 per quart wholesale.” The strain of these prices affected everyone, but especially the poor. In an effort to ease the suffering of those they visited during October of

1918, the sisters worked with both the League of Catholic Women and the Ladies Aid Society to provide food for the most needy of those stricken by the disease.

While the Lowell sisters wrote about their work in their Annals, they went one step further by keeping daily logs of their visits between October 10th and 26th. Not only did they list the families and how many visits were made, the sisters also noted the type of food that was distributed to the poor. Most of the nourishment given was designed for the sick—various types of broths, pudding, and custards. But other foods were also delivered, including bread and meat, vegetables and rice, fruit and eggs, sugar and butter, items that were often beyond the ability of the poor to purchase themselves. Also given out to many destitute families were sheets, blankets, towels and pillows.

The daily log noted the family name, street address and the situations encountered. For instance, on October 10th, the log stated that at 20 Butterfield Street, "*Grandmother and Father sick. Mother had been taken to hospital. Family not needy, but no one able to prepare nourishment. Made three visits and brought nourishment.*" At 31 Cross Street, "*Three young girls sick, cared for by an older sister. Sent nourishment.*" At 107 Cushing Street, they reported, "*Father and child destitute; nobody to care for them. Brought nourishment. Paid two visits.*" At 1368 Middlesex Street, they found, "*One child very sick, another dead in the next room. Nothing needed but a comforting word to the parents.*" The sisters went multiple times to check on the progress of families that were in extreme need and very ill. For some families, the sisters returned anywhere from 10 to upwards of 40 times to insure they had everything they needed for a full recovery.

Their last call was made on October 26th to Mrs. Burns on Moody Street. The sisters noted it was their second visit and they, "*Bathed and rubbed the patient. Gave her broth and milk. Cleaned the rooms, mopped the floors, made the bed, changed linen and left the old lady quite comfortable.*"

A few days later, schools reopened along with other public buildings. While influenza wasn't gone and would continue off and on until the following spring, the worst of the crisis was mostly over.

- 15 1368 Middlesex Street - One child very sick, another dead in the next
Drew room. Nothing needed but a comforting word to the parents.
- 16 347 Market Street - Mother sick, very miserable, but not needy.
Mrs. Regopolis
- 17 366 Moody Street, rear - four children sick, one with pneumonia, three
Georgaskas with Influenza. Need intelligent care.
- 18 366 Moody Street - Mother sick, needs care.
Arvaniti

From the Daily Report of work Done by the Sisters of Notre Dame at
St. Patrick's Parish, Lowell, Mass. During the Influenza Epidemic, October 1918
SND New England Archives, Ipswich, MA 2016.15

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ St. Patrick's Convent Annals, Lowell, MA 1917-1937.
- ◆ Lowell School Papers, 1852-2006. SND New England Archives, Ipswich, MA. 2016.15.
- ◆ Influenzaarchive.org
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-2016.