



Annals from the Archives

January 1941 Grippe

NEW ENGLAND HIT BY GRIP EPIDEMIC

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—Our recent experiences during the pandemic of 2020-2021 can give a certain perspective as we look back on previous epidemics and pandemics. Today the controversy has focused on whether schools can remain open or if students should learn remotely, but in past decades there weren't always those choices.

According to the Public Health Reports, there were at least 24 influenza pandemics involving two or more continents since the late 1400s. Fourteen of those pandemics spread across most of the United States, while the other ten remained confined to Europe and Asia. The annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur comment with some frequency on the various illnesses of their students and of the sisters in the convent. They also mentioned when schools were closed to keep any virus from spreading. The pandemic of 1918, of course, caused more than schools to be closed in Massachusetts for a month. But there were many other, less severe, outbreaks that created a great deal of disruption to the lives of those living during those times.

In January of 1941, the Annalist in Peabody wrote that, *"We almost had a forced vacation in January. An epidemic of the grippe broke out in Peabody and our school was among those which suffered most. Sister Superior and many of the teachers had to give in after nobly trying to resist the attack. More than three hundred children had to absent themselves from classes but these [the classes] continued with a regularity that was pleasing to the State Board of Health and the local school board. The State officials declared we did the sensible thing. They were not in favor of the schools closing, while the movie houses remained open. The latter refused to do more than promise that they would endeavor to keep the children out. They were not very successful in their endeavors, so the local school board, following our example, refused to close the public schools in the city."*

The Flu epidemic began in late fall of 1940 in the Pacific northwest, with more than 50,000 cases. It quickly spread across the Great Plains and South, leading to another 50,000 cases. By January of 1941, the virus had reached New England, causing schools in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine to close and many businesses and factories to have workers out sick. In Portland, Maine, hospitals were filled to overflowing with the sick.

The first mention of the illness in local newspapers came just after the beginning of the new year. The *Boston Globe* reported on January 2, 1941 that the Deer Island House of Correction was under quarantine. As is true today, those in prisons had no means to avoid the quick spread of disease. Less than a week later, the January 7th edition of the *Boston Globe* reported that despite the closing of many schools, *"health officials at the State House declared. . . that there was no epidemic of influenza in the state."* In the same issue, Cambridge schools reported that more than 2500 children and 75 teachers were out sick. The very next day, however, the *Boston Globe* stated that while officials didn't view the outbreak as serious, hundreds of workers were stricken, as well as more than 20,000 school children across the state. Nearly 150 police in the city of Boston were also out sick. Schools closed in Wakefield, Marblehead, Plymouth, Ware, Palmer and Athol. Portsmouth, NH also closed its schools, as did many towns and cities in Maine. Though there were few reported deaths, unfortunately, one of the students from St. John's in Peabody succumbed to the flu.

"On the Feast of St. Agnes [Jan 21], one of our Eighth Grade girls, Mildred Wesley, died at the Salem Hospital. . . Mildred was in school Wednesday . . . and the following Sunday she was with God."

Though there was no vaccine yet, reports came in that students at Harvard College had volunteered to be “guinea pigs.” On January 17th, the *Boston Globe* reported that, “the recent grippe or ‘flu’ epidemic gave Harvard Medical School students a chance to volunteer as ‘guinea pigs’ for science. Half of the students took injections of a new experimental influenza serum; the other half took their chances with the ‘bugs’ uninjected as ‘controls’ or check on the results of the serum. The experimental serum is being tested in a number of other medical institutions. . . .” These experiments eventually led to the first influenza vaccine being given to the general public beginning in 1945.

While St. John’s in Peabody suffered the death of a student, there were few other deaths during this influenza epidemic. But the ongoing spread of the virus affected induction ceremonies for new servicemen. Though the United States was not yet at war, there were numerous volunteers for the various branches of service. On January 15th the *Boston Globe* reported that, “The epidemic grippe which has been closing schools and emptying offices throughout the state will have its effect on the induction of the 26th Division into Federal service tomorrow. . . . Many of the officers and men attached to headquarters have been out for various short intervals for the past 10 days. . . . However, the epidemic conditions, while complicating the formality of induction, will not cause any change in plans. Men laid up by sickness will merely go through the induction process when they are well enough. All others will report tomorrow.”

By the end of January, there were few influenza cases still remaining in Massachusetts. But as always, because the influenza virus continues to mutate, the public was, and is always, on the alert for another epidemic.



From the *Boston Globe*
January 14, 1941

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Peabody Convent Annals, 1912-1943.
- ◆ *The Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2020.
- ◆ *The New York Times* Archives, 1852-2020.
- ◆ Center for Disease Control, cdc.gov.