

MUSINGS ON LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

"Like then, like now" - Part One

by Sally Seufert Holmes

May 2020

My name is Sally Seufert Holmes, a Dedham native. This spring, the Dedham Historical Society & Museum (DHSM) invited the town's residents to share any thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic for its archives. It is, indeed, an extraordinary time, each of us navigating this global event in our own way, both physically and emotionally. In response to DHSM's call to the community, I am offering the following musings to a future gallery of Dedhamites.

As 66-year-olds, my husband Mark and I have complied with the "stay-at-home" order since mid-March. We understand that, by doing so, we're collectively, with our community, helping to slow the virus. One big change for us, during this time period, has been not being able to visit indoors with our daughters and grandchildren. Another change for me, personally, is that I've been furloughed from a part-time retail job that I've been enjoying in my early retirement years. The impact of these restrictions to our lifestyle is infinitesimally nanoscopic in comparison to the sacrifices of the essential workers on the frontlines. Every day, individuals including medical and emergency personnel and cleaning maintenance, grocery store, mortuary, and cemetery workers put themselves in harms' way for us all.¹

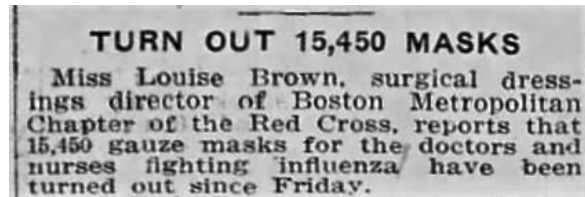
To fill my stay-at-home time and to contribute productively to the COVID-19 fight, I initially jumped on a grassroots wave of sewists, dusting off my sewing machine and making cotton masks for a nearby skilled nursing facility. This grassroots movement across the U.S. began in March in response to an ill-prepared nation's pandemic supply closet. Six weeks and two hundred masks later, my homemade stock was (happily) supplanted at this particular skilled nursing facility by professionally made masks.

Hugely thankful that my donation site would now be receiving medical-grade face wear, I next turned to some pandemic research that I had conducted while stitching my masks. (My laptop was set up next to my sewing machine so that I could google random thoughts on the "then and now." The "then" that I was interested in was the Great Influenza of 1918-1919.)

As one who takes stock in history, I believe that experiences of the present, in some cases, echo the past. The COVID-19 virus and resulting shut-downs that ensued like a domino effect this spring were, in my realm, unprecedented. Social distancing and shuttered classrooms, businesses, restaurants, churches – the list goes on and on – this was all alien to me. And then there were the masks. That's where my googling began...

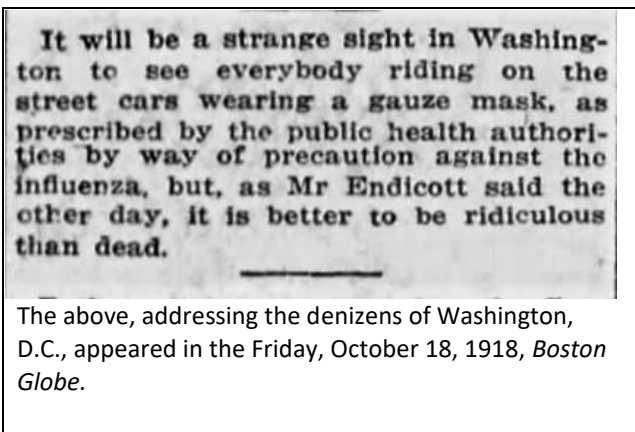
¹ (S.724) "The Essential Services Act of 2013" – This Senate bill defines an essential worker as "an employee that performs work involving the safety of human life or the protection of property." https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-bill/724/text?mod=article_inline

Masks

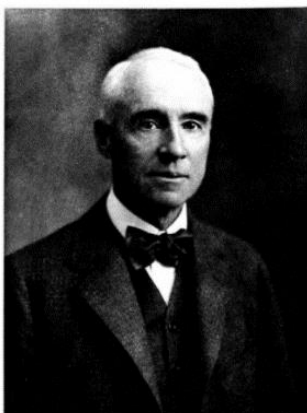


The Great Influenza (also known as “the Spanish flu” and “the grippe”) hit the U.S. like a ton of bricks in the late summer/early fall of 1918 and masks were in urgent need. The above *Boston Globe* article appeared in the October 1, 1918, edition at the onset of the first deadly wave.

In early March 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services reported that the U.S. mask stockpile was just 1% of the 3.5 billion that would be needed over the next year.² And, thus, **like then, like now**, the scramble to mass produce masks has ensued.



(See left.) **Like then, like now.** Indeed, today’s mask-wearing population is “a strange sight.” Mr. Endicott would be happy to know that presently, most individuals, myself included, are taking his advice. And it appears that back in 1918, like today, there wasn’t consensus on mask-wearing. The “to wear or not to wear” is a worldwide debate during this COVID-19 pandemic.



H B Endicott

The above-quoted Mr. Endicott was none other than Dedham’s Henry “H.B.” Bradford Endicott.³ Born in Dedham in 1853, he was the son of Augustus Endicott, a deputy sheriff and banker, and Sarah Fairbanks, a direct descendant of the town’s most famous founding family. From these modest circumstances, Henry Endicott built a multi-million dollar shoe manufacturing business, the Endicott Johnson Corporation.

² www.businessinsider.com/usa-1-percent-3-billion-face-masks-needed-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-3

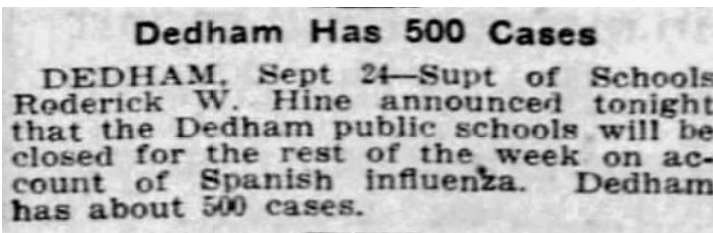
³ Photo credit: Henry B. Endicott – *A Brief Memoir of His Life and Services to the State and Nation* (Wendell Endicott, 1921)



During World War I, Mr. Endicott took a leave of absence from his business ventures to serve as executive manager of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety and, subsequently, as chairman of the Emergency Public Health Committee of Massachusetts during the Great Influenza pandemic. Ironically, Mr. Endicott died of complications from influenza in February 1920.⁴

(Left) The beautiful Endicott Estate.⁵ This iconic Dedham landmark was built by H.B. Endicott in 1904 and is now owned by the town.

School Closures



From the onset, Dedham was in no way spared the influenza's onslaught, as evidenced by the number of reported cases. The closure of Dedham schools was announced in the Wednesday, September 25, 1918, *Boston Globe*.

My grandparents, the Brennans, were residents of the town. In later years, recalling the Great Influenza, my grandmother, Frances O'Leary Brennan, spoke of coffins lined up in Dedham Square. Fearing infection, she said that she kept her children far away from Dedham Center, never venturing out from their home on Federal Hill.



Frederick E. Grant in 1907
(Holmes photo)

My uncle, Dr. Frederick E. Grant, would have been involved in Superintendent Hine's decision-making on the closure of the schools (article above). In 1918, Dr. Grant was in his fourth of eighteen distinguished years of service as a Dedham School Committee member.

⁴ *Boston Globe* - November 22, 1910 and *Press and Sun-Bulletin*, Binghamton, NY, February 13, 1920

⁵ Photo credit: endicottestate.com



Dexter School, Dedham

Group photo of the lower grades taken during the 1919-1920 school year. (Note team of horses in the background!)⁶ My mother, Ruth Brennan Seufert, (third row, seventh from the left, white hair bow) is among the first graders in the photo. The previous September/October 1918, the older children pictured here would have been affected by Dedham's month-long school shut-down, in response to the influenza pandemic.



Like then, like now. COVID-19 has closed schools down. Today's students are learning remotely via online instruction. The closure period, beginning in March, will be months longer than that of 1918. As of this writing, the schools haven't reopened. Online instruction will stay in place through the end of the school year in June.

Pictured are my grandson (Kindergarten) and granddaughter (Preschool). During this stay-at-home period, my grandson's school days consist of remote online classroom instruction provided by his teacher. Correctly so, his little sister assigns the blame for the closure of her preschool on COVID-19 or, in her words, "the birus."

Just as the team of horses in the above Dexter School picture looks antiquated to us in present-day 2020, the same will be true someday when viewing this car."⁷

⁶ Holmes photo

⁷ Holmes photo

Hospitals and Jails

Hospital in Dedham Church
Dedham Board of Health has opened an emergency grippe hospital in the Unitarian Church vestry.



Pictured: The vestry circa 1918.⁸ The vestry still stands today on the property of the Unitarian Universalist First Church and Parish, 670 High Street, Dedham.

The Tuesday, October 1, 1918, *Boston Globe* made the above announcement. According to the *Globe*, upon receiving the report the day before of 175 new cases of influenza and 50 new cases of pneumonia in the town, the Dedham board of selectman called a special meeting and made the decision to open the emergency hospital. By the next morning, the town had already carried out the board's directive as follows:⁹

Prisoners under the direction of Charles Ingalls, assistant custodian of the Superior Court building, were kept busy this morning carrying beds and bedding from the Courthouse to the Unitarian vestry on High st, where the emergency hospital established by the Selectmen to fight the grippe has been arranged for. The beds were those that are used during a capital case. There will be beds for 30 patients, with five nurses in attendance and a motor ambulance in readiness night and day.

More than 150 cases of influenza have been discovered among the 500 inmates at Charlestown State Prison, and six at Norfolk County Jail in Dedham, where four prisoners and night officer Thomas H. Brennan and engineer William E. Gray are the victims.

That same day, the *Globe* was reporting an outbreak of influenza in the very jail that was loaning out its prisoners for the set-up of the nearby emergency hospital. (Left)

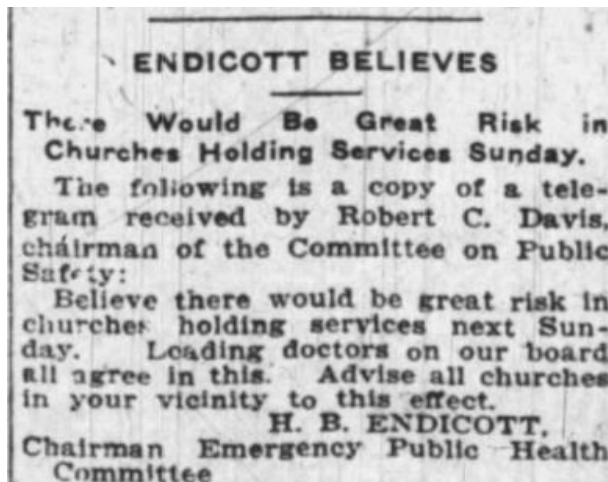
Like then, like now. Globally, the concentrated populations inside prisons are seeing a high infection rate. And, like the 1918 Great Influenza, COVID-19 doesn't discriminate between inmates and jail personnel.

Also hit disproportionately hard in today's pandemic are care facilities for our veterans and the elderly.

⁸ Photo credit: *Images of America – Dedham*, Dedham Historical Society, 2001

⁹ *Boston Globe* – Tuesday, October 1, 1918

Churches



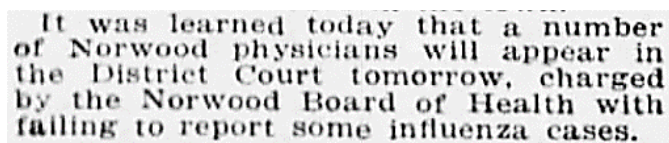
This article (left), "Endicott Believes," appeared in the October 3, 1918, edition of the *Fall River Globe*, Henry Endicott cautioning Massachusetts towns against holding church services on the following Sunday, October 6.

At least one Dedham church, St. Mary of the Assumption, followed suit (below).¹⁰ St. Mary's would remain closed until the fourth Sunday in October.



Like then, like now. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches, nationwide, have closed their doors, with some offering virtual services as an alternative. Other churches have remained open, if in compliance with observing a mandated cap on the number of worshippers during a given service. For some, these restrictions are a religious freedom issue and are being challenged.

Reporting

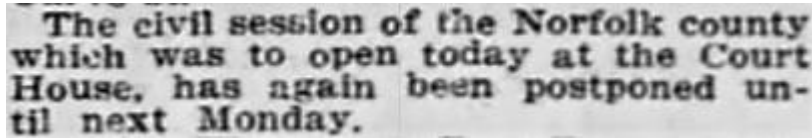


Like then, like now. Just as we're doing today, officials back in 1918 tracked the virus by number infected and took reporting seriously, as evidenced in the above *Boston Globe* article¹¹.

¹⁰ Boston Globe – Saturday, October 5, 1918

¹¹ Boston Globe – Monday, December 30, 1918 – This article was tagged, "Dedham, Dec. 29," therefore the court date was December 30.

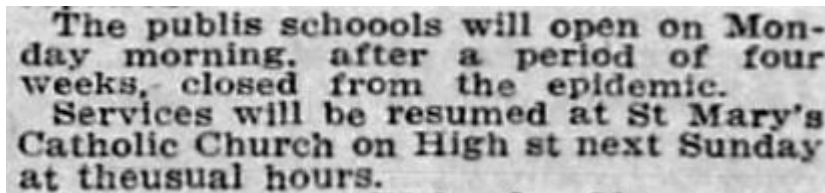
Reopening Life



Like then, like now. As of this writing, May 2020, reopening is as tough a call as it was back in 1918. The

timing is, understandably, a hot topic. The shuttering of non-essential businesses for two months has stricken the economy and skyrocketed unemployment.

The above announcement appeared in the October 21st edition of the *Boston Globe*. Evidently, the officials sanctioning the reopening of the Norfolk County Court's civil session had a change of heart, perhaps erring on the side of caution.



By the end of the week, however, on Friday October 25, 1918, the *Boston Globe* heralded the reopening of Dedham schools. Also reopening for Sunday Mass

was St. Mary's, its church doors having been shuttered since October 6.



A few parting comments about “**Like then, like now.**” When I wrote above that experiences of the present echo the past, I qualified my statement by saying “in some cases.” What is exponentially different between the “then and now” are the numbers. While hardly diminishing the significant COVID-19 infection rate and death toll, I must give due respect to the estimated 500 million people worldwide who contracted the Spanish flu and, of those, the 50 million souls who died.¹²

And, unlike now, back then, the Great Influenza split top billing in the newspapers with the long, heartbreaking rosters of the war dead and missing-in-action, lists that would continue for months after the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

Finally, the shortages. During this COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced sporadic scarcity of items such as flour, meat and (of all things) toilet paper. When the Great Influenza came to town in 1918, Dedhamites had already been negotiating far-greater wartime shortages that included flour, sugar, meat, paper, and gasoline.¹³ Eggs cost \$1.20 a dozen, which would be \$20.38 today.

¹² <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>

¹³ *A history of Dedham, Massachusetts* (Frank Smith, 1936)

This is where I shall put my “**Like then, like now**” comparisons on pause, in the midst of global debates on the logistics of reopening and a projected “second wave” of infection later this year. The musings I have offered are “Part One,” with “Part Two” to follow in the coming months.

Respectfully submitted,

Sally Seufert Holmes