Looking Back: How Spanish Influenza Impacted Haddonfield During 1918-1919

By Katherine Mansfield Tassini

The Historical Society of Haddonfield's "Haddonfield Virus Year" project inspired me to do some research on the Spanish Influenza in Haddonfield in 1918-1919.

Until now, I could have told you only one story about it: that a Haddonfield resident named Norman Nicholson died of the Spanish Influenza while serving at Camp Dix during World War I. When the Society did its World War I exhibit a few years ago, we told the story of Norman's death, along with the three other Haddonfield soldiers who died during the war.

Norman Nicholson was one of at least 27 Haddonfield residents who died from the Spanish flu in 1918-1919. Nicholson died while stationed at Camp Dix in New Jersey. (American Legion Haddonfield Post 38 scrapbook scans, accession 2019-018)

With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting Haddonfield residents this spring, I did some research in the *Haddon Gazette* and other local newspapers and gained a much fuller picture of Haddonfield's experiences during this earlier pandemic.

One of the most interesting observations that this research has made clear to me regarding the "Great Influenza of 1918-1919" is how similarly it mimics what is happening in 2020.

It is generally believed that what became known as the "Spanish Flu" probably began with a bird or farm animal somewhere in the Midwest. It appears that a mild flu virus was active in the U.S. in the first half of 1918 and that it spread to Europe with the American troops who were being sent to fight in World War I. In the summer of 1918, there did not seem to be much flu in the U.S., but it spread quickly and became much more virulent in Europe. The virus was so deadly in Spain that it became known as the "Spanish Flu" - certainly a misnomer.

The flu began to spread out of control all over Europe. The new, more dangerous "Spanish Flu," when it returned to the U.S. with American troops beginning in August, hit both American troops and civilians as a much more virulent and deadly virus. Beginning in September 1918, thousands of troops began to come down with this much more devastating version of the virus.

By September 28, 1918, when a "Liberty Loan" parade held in Philadelphia is now known to have spread infection widely, the Camden area had already become a hotbed of the virus. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, three days before the Philadelphia parade, Haddonfield already had "more than 40 cases" of the flu in town.

There was no real medical treatment for the Spanish flu, so socially isolating oneself and basic medical support for those affected was about all that could be done.

On October 3, 1918, the *Haddon Gazette* reported that Haddonfield public schools and Haddonfield Friends School were closed for "at least ten days," and the Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution prohibiting "all indoor public gatherings which would include lodges, societies, churches, moving picture theatre, library, etc. Similar precautions have been taken at many other places in Penna. and N.J." The same article noted, "All the local physicians are working practically day and night and the matter has taken a very serious aspect within a few days."

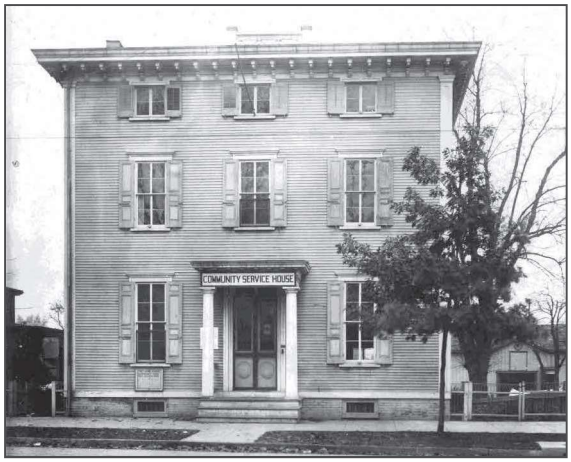
By October 10, the *Gazette* reported that there had been six deaths in Haddonfield so far. Interestingly, most were younger people:

Margaret A. Bossert, who died a week after her husband Benjamin E. Bossert, both in their 30s; Charles A. Seals, age 34; Lester Alfred Deaner, age 28; Agatha Wade, age 24; and of course Norman Nicholson, who was 27. Benjamin Bossert's 31-year-old brother, Walter C. Bossert, died on October 11. More Haddonfield residents may have died in Philadelphia or Camden hospitals, like George D. Connelly, age 33, who was reported to have died in a Philadelphia hospital.

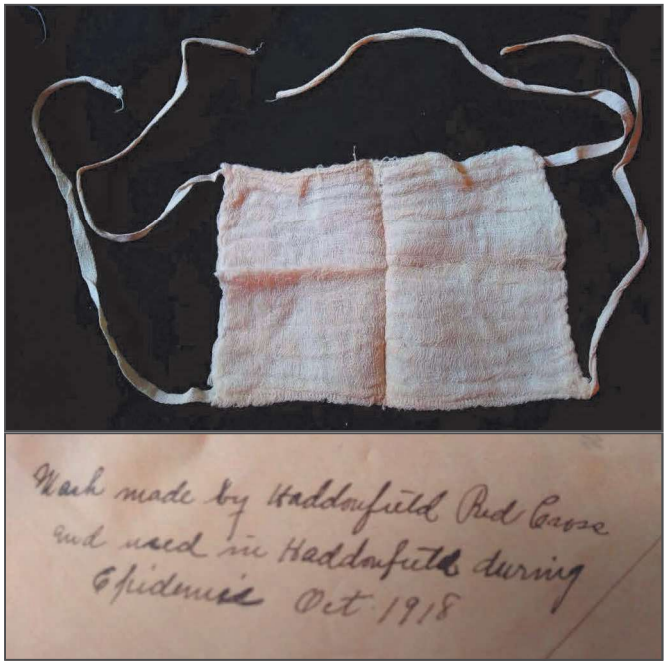
Also on October 10, Haddonfield created its own "Emergency Hospital" at the Community Service House at 37 Kings Highway East. The Emergency Hospital was run by the Loving Service, predecessor to the Visiting Nurse Association. At the time of the report, the hospital had about a dozen beds and cots and was almost ready for patients.

According to a reminiscence by E. Florence Cox, the Loving Service "had the idea of a Hospital in mind for a long time, and had gradually equipped itself with a number of articles necessary for the operation of such an institution, so that when the actual need arose this organization was able, within twenty-four Hours, to have the Hospital ready for occupancy" (HSH small accession 1913-001-0063). (The Community House was replaced with a new building circa 1950.)

The deaths from influenza continued. Three victims were reported on October 14, and at least four other residents died in mid-October.



The Community House at 37 Kings Highway East served as an emergency hospital during the influenza epidemic.



This gauze mask from 1918 was saved by Haddonfield resident Carrie Nicholson Hartel. The envelope indicates it was made by the Haddonfield Red Cross. (Photos courtesy of Carrie's granddaughter, Dianne Snodgrass)

However, by October 24, the *Haddon Gazette* reported that the epidemic was subsiding, with fewer new cases reported. On October 30, the Haddonfield authorities received word from the State Board of Health that the ban on public gatherings could be lifted in Haddonfield. The Board of Education reported that schools would open on the following Monday (November 4).

On November 28, the *Gazette* ran a letter of appreciation from Catharine M. Thomson, President of the Loving Service, thanking the "men, women, youth and children of Haddonfield and vicinity who by lavish outpouring of their money, goods and time, made possible the Emergency Hospital during the recent epidemic of Influenza."

According to newspaper tallies, Haddonfield ultimately counted at least 920 cases of influenza between September 1918 and January 1919, and at least 27 people died in Haddonfield.