

Signs of the 1919 Influenza Pandemic in North Yarmouth

by Katie Murphy

The final pages of North Yarmouth Town Reports from 1893-1966 lists births, marriages, and deaths of each year. For the pandemic years, 1918 and 1919, three influenza and influenza-related deaths appear in the reports: those of Bertha Beal Dobson, Randall Johnson, and Ruth Blake Smith. The notations of their deaths are spare; the stories behind their deaths are little known. Thanks to research by Dixie Hayes, we know a bit more. Visit northyarmouthhistorical.org to read in depth about these victims and about the difficult days of the Pandemic.

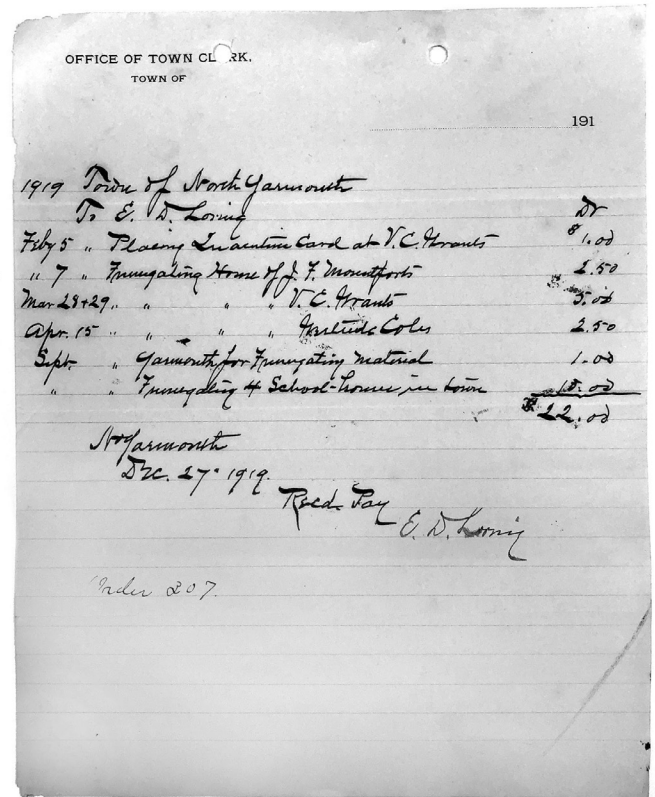
Is there more documentaton in the NYHS Archives that could shed light on the Pandemic in North Yarmouth back then? Yes, although it would take some digging—and these days, because of the Covid pandemic of 2020, access to our Archives is limited. Nevertheless, I got lucky last week.

While looking for images for the Care of the Poor article in this Gazette I came across a bill to the Town from E.D. Loring for actions taken to help keep the flu from spreading.

Reading between the lines, this small scrap of paper shows that influenza, like today's coronavirus, was steadily working its way through rural as well as urban communities. The flu raged in Portland so badly that an emergency medical facility, Queen's Hospital, was quickly thrown together, opening its doors in December 1918 to desperately ill flu patients.

In North Yarmouth, long time Town Clerk Edward Dafforne Loring was working to keep influenza at bay. At the time he served as Town Clerk as well as a member of North Yarmouth's Board of Health. At a time when visiting nurses existed in the distant future and doctors were few and far between in the community, town officials certainly had to step in to help ensure public safety. As our current Town Clerk Debbie Grover would attest, the job of a public servant goes far beyond the official job description. At 77 years old, and in the middle of winter, E.D. Loring went the extra mile to keep town residents safe.

And what of the households of V.C. Grant, J.F. Mountfort, and Gertrude Cole in the spring of 1919? The 1920 Census shows that these families all lived relatively near each another. Town Selectman Vernor Chandler Grant lived with his wife Mary on New Gloucester Road near Mill Road; he died in 1921 of a short illness at age 58. Capt. James Mountfort lived at 546 Walnut Hill Road with his daughter Florence. Gertrude Cole was living with her 11-year-old niece in the Cole house that once stood at the entrance to the Dugas gravel pit on New Gloucester Road. Her father-in-law Daniel had died in January 1919. Daniel's obituary



1919 Town of North Yarmouth to E. D. Loring

Febry. 5. Placing Quarantine card at V.C. Grant's..	\$ 1.00
Febry 7. Fumigating Home of J. F. Mountfort	\$ 2.50
Mar 28&29. Fumigating Home of V.C. Grant's.....	\$ 5.00
Apr. 15. Fumigating Home of Gertrude Cole's	\$ 2.50
Sept. Yarmouth for Fumigating Material	\$ 1.00
Sept. Fumigating 4 School-houses in Town.....	\$10.00
	<u>\$22.00</u>

NYarmouth

Dec. 27 1919 Rec'd Pay E.D. Loring

said that he had been "in poor health and suffered greatly in his last two weeks." Unless we find more records, it's impossible to know who in all these households had been sick with the flu, making fumigation necessary.

In general, influenza victims in 1918-1919 were younger people, and therefore it was vital that schoolhouses were kept as safe as possible at the beginning of the school year. Thus E.D. Loring fumigated the Baston, Hicks, Dunn, and Walnut Hill schoolhouses before students arrived in September. Within the next couple of months, cold winter weather arrived and with it, the waning of the flu. Residents could breathe easier, thanks to the freezing weather ... and to the care of town officials. ☪