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THE 1918 INFLUENZA OUTBREAK IN HARRISBURG

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ABSTRACT: When Spanish influenza broke out in Harrisburg in 1918, it naturally concerned City Beautiful reformers who had underscored clean water and advocated public health. This study of the outbreak and responses to it through documents and new digital tools sheds light on the local spatial and demographic patterns of those affected by the disease in Pennsylvania's capital city.

KEYWORDS: City Beautiful, Harrisburg, Spanish influenza, spatial history, John M. J. Raunick

The destructive impact of the Spanish influenza of 1918–19 was almost unimaginable. An H1N1 virus and the ancestor of all modern forms of influenza, this virus attacked the respiratory system and lungs and infected approximately one-third of the world's population in that two year span. Most of those affected died after only a week of symptoms that included high fevers and perpetual coughing. Between fifty and seventy million people worldwide died of the disease or its complications. Harrisburg, like other cities of its time, could not avoid the epidemic. Out of its approximately 75,000 residents, 440 Harrisburg citizens died from the Spanish influenza.¹

Despite the outbreak's potential connections to City Beautiful, the reform movement concerned from its inception with the health of the public, there have been no extensive scholarly studies on the Harrisburg outbreak. When Mira Lloyd Dock gave her famous speech to the Board of Trade in 1900, she emphasized "the value given to cleanliness and beauty in other lands" in comparison to the seemingly poor value given to them in Harrisburg.² The Civic Club of Harrisburg, which Dock helped found, mainly focused on assisting the city with urban reforms. It often went to great lengths to promote health in the home–even leading a city-wide crusade against germs

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and the housefly.³ Among many other projects, the Civic Club led a movement to clean the riverbanks and recommended proper garbage disposal for households.⁴ City Beautiful's main projects were parks, clean streets, and clean water–all of which point to a goal of a clean Harrisburg, not just a beautiful one.

Certain reformers were directly concerned with public health. A key local member of the City Beautiful movement was Dr. John M. J. Raunick, who became the head of Harrisburg's Public Health Department in 1912. The *Harrisburg Telegraph* in August of that year noted that his election was the result of his work against a recent smallpox outbreak.⁵ He organized projects where workers (likely including some prisoners) cleaned the streets of debris and garbage. Raunick's approach to street cleaning resembled the Civic Club's improvement efforts.

When the Spanish influenza epidemic broke out in the fall of 1918, Dr. Raunick took measures to ensure the safety of Harrisburg. He declared quarantines and closed public events. By October 5, 1918, court sessions were postponed, libraries and schools closed, and churches shut down.⁶ Dr. Raunick talked to factory owners to reduce cable-car and pedestrian congestion in hopes of limiting the spread of the virus. Many area employers cooperated and allowed workers to leave at intervals, so cable cars and streets would be less crowded.⁷ The daily papers reinforced related messages through articles that promoted good health; one piece, published in October in the *Courier*, advised taking in fresh air, wearing masks and aprons, drinking milk, and using appropriate coughing etiquette.⁸ The Public Health Department, moreover, developed quarantine plans to help hospitals deal with the overflow of patients. The department enlisted Boy Scouts to serve as doctors' clerks and convinced taxis to offer free rides to doctors visiting patients. These were bold steps intended to serve the common good of Harrisburg.

In spite of these measures, many Harrisburgers contracted the disease and eventually died of it. Death certificates from late summer and fall of 1918 (when the epidemic peaked) regularly indicate Spanish influenza (or "El Grippe" as it was sometimes called) or some form of pneumonia as a primary or secondary cause of death. Connecting these certificates to census datasets and GIS of the Digital Harrisburg Project help to establish the general patterns of the disease and its spread across the city (figs. I–2).

While there were a handful of deaths attributed to pneumonia or La Grippe between February and August, the epidemic really began in the second half of September (n = 8 recorded deaths) in the southern part of



FIGURE 1. Map showing 1918 influenza deaths of Harrisburg residents according to frequency by ward and distribution by home address across city. Courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

the city (in the Second and Thirteenth Wards), and near Market Street and Cameron. The virus then spread north through the heart of town in the first half of October (n = 136), and ravaged especially the Sixth,



FIGURE 2. Map showing 1918 influenza deaths of Harrisburg residents according to home address in Ward 9. Figure shows the proximity of deaths by disease for certain streets. Courtesy of the author.

Seventh, and Tenth Wards. By the end of the month, the number of deaths had nearly doubled (n = 235) as the disease spread along the river and moved eastward through the Thirteenth Ward. The timeline shows that the deaths circle around the Sixth and Seventh Wards, residential areas in the center and eastern part of the city. In November, influenza continued to spread within the city's center, especially in the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Wards, but slowed considerably overall, as evident in the sharp decline in deaths between the first half of the month (n = 63) and the second (n = 17). In December, a lower mortality rate continued in the first (n = 33) and second half (n = 30) of the month, with the Ninth Ward being the hardest hit. In spatial terms, the virus spread from the south side of the city at the axis of the railway system. While it affected virtually every ward (figs. 1 and 3), the southern part of the city (Wards I, 2, 7, and 9, especially) and the northeast sector (Ward 7) were the hardest hit.

These demographic datasets also reveal the effects of the epidemic on the population of Harrisburg. Nationwide, Spanish influenza acted differently than previous epidemics. In the past, other strains of influenza had a higher

Ward Number	Count of Deaths	% of Total Deaths	% of Ward Population
1	46	10.5%	1.1%
2	57	13.0%	0.7%
3	18	4.1%	1.0%
4	19	4.3%	0.6%
5	18	4.1%	0.4%
6	20	4.6%	0.5%
7	69	15.8%	0.8%
8	28	6.4%	0.5%
9	62	14.2%	0.5%
10	34	7.8%	0.4%
11	29	6.6%	0.5%
12	17	3.9%	0.3%
13	20	4.6%	0.6%
14	1	0.2%	0.1%

FIGURE 3. Table showing 1918 influenza deaths of Harrisburg residents by ward. Courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

mortality rate among infants and the elderly and left other age groups mostly untouched; the Spanish Flu, by contrast, was especially detrimental for those between ages twenty and forty. In Harrisburg, the toll on the elderly was not as high as elsewhere: a little over 4% of the city's population was over 65 years of age (4.0% in 1910 and 4.5% in 1920 based on each year's census), and this demographic group comprised 5.1% of those killed by influenza in 1918. However, young children under the age of 5 fared less well: this group constituted 8–9% of the city's population (8.7% in 1910, 8.2% in 1920) but counted for 14.2% of deaths. The middle-aged in Harrisburg were cut down in significant numbers by the disease; they made up about 40% of the population (40.4% in 1910, 38.1% in 1920) but constituted 55.4% of deaths by late 1918.⁹ Still, Harrisburg's patterns resemble those of other cities, as the average and median age for those who died in the epidemic was roughly 29 (compared to Chicago's average of 28). If there are similarities, there are many potential avenues for analyzing the local situation. Many in Harrisburg, for example, may have been more prone to the disease based on socioeconomic circumstances. African Americans and immigrants made up, respectively, only 7.0% and 6.4% of Harrisburg's population in 1920, but accounted for 11.2% and 11.4% of deaths.¹⁰ Of foreign-born residents (fig. 4), those from Italy had the most deaths (16), followed by Austria (12) and Russia (10), while German-born and Englandborn residents saw only 1 or 2 losses. Whether these statistics have to do with differences in the total population of these groups, or their relative affluence and place of residence, is the sort of question that one can only address with more detailed data.

In many ways, Harrisburg followed global patterns in its experiences with the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, but there were also differences in the epidemic's spread in Pennsylvania's capital city. The reverberating effects of the City Beautiful movement manifested in the work of John Raunick of the Public Health Department seem to have limited the scope of the epidemic. Analysis of datasets from Harrisburg also reveal some anomalies. Continued



FIGURE 4. Pie chart showing 1918 influenza deaths in Harrisburg according to foreign birthplace. Courtesy of the author.

work with these sources holds the potential to further develop our understanding of this deadly epidemic in the Capital City.

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NOTES

- I. County death records record 528 people who died of influenza in Harrisburg in 1918, including visitors from out of town and residents from New Cumberland, Steelton, Middletown, and other neighboring communities who came to Harrisburg's hospitals for treatment. The actual number of deaths among Harrisburg residents was about 440.
- 2. "The City Beautiful," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, December 21, 1900.
- 3. "Civic Club Will Post Fly Notices," Harrisburg Telegraph, June 15, 1911.
- 4. "Civic Club Wants River Bank Kept Clean," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, November 26, 1901.
- 5. "Dr. Raunick's Election," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, August 24, 1912.
- 6. "City Accepts Heavy Quarantine," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, October 5, 1918.
- 7. "Emergency Hospitals Will Be Established," *Harrisburg Courier*, October 6, 1918, 1.
- 8. "Uncle Sam's Advice on Flu," *Harrisburg Courier*, October 20, 1918, 6. "Cover up each cough and sneeze, if you don't you'll spread disease."
- 9. As there is no recorded population count for Harrisburg in 1918, our best estimate must follow an approximate average of 1910 and 1920 census. It is possible of course that the 1920 counts are lower due to death by influenza and (in the case of adults) World War I. But the fact of general similarity in proportions between census years permits the comparison.
- 10. To compute these statistics, the author chose to combine categories "Black," "Colored," and "Mulatto," since many were a part of the same communities and the categories were somewhat arbitrary (see David Pettegrew and Albert Sarvis, "The Digital Harrisburg Project: Placing the Population of a Progressive Era City," in this issue). I titled the overall group as those of "African descent."