



Historically Speaking

*with Eastchester Town Historian
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The Impact of the Spanish Flu on Eastchester

How did the town of Eastchester react to the Spanish flu? The few beds at Lawrence Hospital were soon filled. Christ Episcopal Church in Bronxville opened its doors to the sick and dying. Homes were quarantined but the disease continued to spread. Finally the major employer in the town, the Hodgman Rubber factory that had over 1,600 people working for them, voluntarily shut its doors and turned the factory into a sick ward for the town.

It is impossible to note the exact number of people afflicted in the town. Public funerals were not allowed. Schools, churches, theaters, and other forms of public assemblies were closed. A well known citizen whose name was not given to the local paper *The Eastchester Citizen's Bulletin* described conditions on the most populated street in Tuckahoe, Columbus Avenue, "I went on that street on Friday evening on a matter of business, shortly after 8 o'clock and was amazed to see no one on the streets and lights burning dimly in but three places." Later in the article he described the extent of the flu when he said, "scarcely a family now had some members or members down with the flu."

Why is it that so little is known about this terrible plague? The flu broke out in the continental United States and Europe at the end of World War I. Strict censorship was enforced and there was a concerted effort not to create a general panic that would detract from the war effort. However, Spain was a neutral country and when the disease hit a resort town the Spanish newspaper publicized the virulence of this dread disease. But the flu did not originate in Spain.

The pandemic originated on military bases where close troop quarters and massive troop movements increased transmission. World War I did not cause the flu but the stress of this terrible war certainly did not help. The 'Spanish flu' began at military bases in Boston and Fort Riley, Kansas. It is obvious that the 'flu' had a devastating impact on our town but more research has to be done on the number of people who died and how the dead were disposed of.

Thanks to Mike Fix we know about the deadly impact of the 'Spanish flu' upon two soldiers from the town. Mike is well into the process of conducting a massive study of soldiers from the town who gave their lives while in the service of their country. Mike discovered that the first soldier to succumb to the disease was an African American draftee who lived at 260 Columbus Ave. named Accie Jeffers.

Accie was a member of Battery D, 349 Regiment of the American Expeditionary Forces. After the armistice Accie Jeffers was sent to Germany occupation duty. Accie was in a holding camp, moving equipment. He contracted the flu and died in January of 1919. He was the first and only African American from Tuckahoe to die in the service of his country. On Dec. 30, 1932, a Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #2768 was named in his honor.

The other soldier to die was Corp. Paul Ruth. He fought in the Battle of Argonne Woods. Corp. Ruth wrote a touching letter to his family about his experiences in combat that Mike Fix uncovered:

"And I came through all these dangers without a scratch or went through an event that left the smell of fire on my garments. You wonder and you wonder again when you have the time to think and make comparison with all the lead, iron, gas, and liquid fire, how many mortals can come out of alive and sane. But I did and remain to tell the story."

While waiting to go home Corp. Paul Ruth contracted the Spanish Flu and died on Feb. 18, 1918.

Today the world awaits the second wave of a world wide pandemic. Fortunately this flu is nowhere near as deadly and does not kill young men and women in the prime of their lives. The year 1919 was the deadliest since the bubonic plague of the late Middle Ages. But little is mentioned of this killer disease in the history books.