



Time in Office: Influenza Pandemic hits Virginia during Westmoreland Davis's term as Governor

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During tours of the Davis Mansion, visitors learn about the lives of Westmoreland and Marguerite Davis, including their dedication to public service. Marguerite's volunteer work with the Red Cross during the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 inspired others to volunteer and offer aid to their fellow Virginians. Learn more about the pandemic and how it impacted Virginians in the article below.

One hundred years ago, communities across the country were recovering from one of the deadliest influenza pandemics in recorded history while the Great War raged in Europe. Scientists and historians estimate that roughly 1/3rd of the world's population (500 million people) were infected with the virus from the spring of 1918 through the spring of 1919. An estimated 675,000 people were infected within the United States. The flu was deadliest to previously healthy men and women in the prime of their lives (between ages of 20 – 40).¹

In the United States unusual flu activity was first noted in some military camps in the spring of 1918. This first wave of the flu, which passed quickly, largely went unnoticed within the United States. However, by April the epidemic was infecting American, British, French and German troops stationed throughout Europe. In May, the *New York Times* noted that a severe illness, similar to the grippe, was spreading quickly through Spain. Some speculated that the disease originated in Germany and was intentionally spread to the Allies. Spain was one of the only countries that was not censoring the news reports, and so they were the only country reporting details of the epidemic. Due to this reporting, the flu became known as "Spanish Influenza", although German troops often referred to the illness as "Flanders Fever".²

In early fall 1918, the second wave of the pandemic flu emerged within the United States. It was first reported at a US Army training camp near Boston and then appeared at a Boston naval facility. Within days the influenza had spread to the civilian population in Boston. Influenza arrived in Virginia at Camp Lee, near Petersburg on September 13, 1918, carried by a newly arrived soldier. Within hours, ten more cases were reported. Three days later, on September 16, there were 500

GOVERNOR'S WIFE QUITS MUNITION PLANT TO AID VICTIMS OF INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC



Mrs. Westmoreland Davis, wife of Virginia governor, at bedside of influenza victim.

¹ *Remembering the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*. 7 May 2018: <https://www.cdc.gov/features/1918-flu-pandemic/index.html>

² Barker, S.F. (2020). The impact of the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic on Virginia (Master's Thesis). Retrieved from University of Richmond Scholarship Repository.

cases at Camp Lee and the base hospital could no longer care for the number of men who had developed symptoms.

As troops were moved from base to base throughout the country, the illness spread. The War Department sought ways to reduce the spread of influenza on military bases and overseas. Bases were quarantined, additional doctors and nurses were sent to camps with high rates of infection, the transport of troops to France was reduced by 10%, and efforts were made to reduce the crowding on troop trains.

At Camp Lee in Virginia, authorities put rules in place to reduce the spread of the illness. Relatives were not permitted to visit the camp if their family member was ill, soldiers were advised to avoid crowds, keep a partition around their bed and avoid using dirty towels or drinking cups. The outbreak at Camp Lee concerned officials in Richmond. The Richmond Health Department displayed posters in restaurants, hotels and streetcars advising residents to avoid crowds and poorly ventilated areas in order to reduce the spread of flu. However, by the beginning of October 1918, the epidemic had spread to Richmond, a city of approximately 170,000 people.³

Viruses had not yet been discovered in 1918 so scientists did not have laboratory tests to detect, diagnose or characterize the flu virus. Scientists now know that the “Spanish Influenza” was caused by the H1N1 virus. In 1918 the medical field could only limit the spread of the disease through “non-pharmaceutical interventions” such as promoting good personal hygiene, quarantining the ill, and closing public gathering places such as schools and churches. Health authorities advised people to cover their coughs and avoid close contact with others.⁴ Unsurprisingly, the flu continued to spread and by early October was in every region of Virginia.

The epidemic became so serious that the federal government began to consider the fight against the flu as part of the war effort. The War Department, Navy Department, US Public Health Service, and Red Cross joined together to develop a plan to fight the influenza. Congress appointed \$1 million to help combat the epidemic, providing funds to equip hospitals and pay for doctors and nurses.

By October 4, 2,000 cases of influenza were reported in Richmond. The Richmond School Board ordered the closing of city schools on October 7. Other public gathering spaces, such as theatres and churches were also advised to close. The next day, October 8, over 10,000 cases of influenza existed in Richmond. City health officials claimed the epidemic was the worst crisis the city had faced since the Civil War.⁵ The State Bureau of Vital Statistics reported that influenza killed almost 6,000 Virginians in the month of October. Many cities on the east coast reported death rates in October that were four to seven times higher than the normal death rate.⁶

As the illness spread, people sought various cures. Many believed that whiskey could either cure the influenza, prevent one from catching the illness, or, at the very least, alleviate the symptoms. In 1918

³ Barker, S.F. (2020). The impact of the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic on Virginia (Master’s Thesis). Retrieved from University of Richmond Scholarship Repository.

⁴ *Remembering the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*. 7 May 2018: <https://www.cdc.gov/features/1918-flu-pandemic/index.html>

⁵ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 8 October 1918.

⁶ *Remembering the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*. 7 May 2018: <https://www.cdc.gov/features/1918-flu-pandemic/index.html>

Virginia, whiskey was not easy to find. In 1915 the Virginia General Assembly passed the Virginia Prohibition Act which took effect on November 1, 1916 and meant that by October of 1918, Virginia had been a dry state for almost two years. Citizens of Virginia wrote to Governor Davis requesting easier access to whiskey. Governor Davis replied that he held no authority over the sale of whiskey and directed citizens to the commissioner of prohibition.⁷ As influenza spread some local governments within Virginia permitted confiscated whiskey to be dispensed to physicians who could then prescribe it for their patients.



Gov. Davis with soldiers at train station.

By late October the number of new influenza cases in Virginia was beginning to decline. In Richmond, city schools reopened on November 6, 1918. There were fears that an increase in new cases would be seen with the lifting of restrictions, but on November 14 the Virginia Health Department officially stated that the epidemic had declined. The end of the Great War and the dramatic decline of influenza was celebrated throughout the country as life appeared to return to normal.

The respite was short-lived, and influenza began reappearing in December 1918.

Schools, churches and other public places

were once again closed in an effort to reduce the spread of illness. New concerns were raised over keeping shops open for the Christmas season, as many of these shops were viewed by health officials as being small and crowded with poor ventilation. Influenza continued to plague parts of Virginia through the early months of 1919 but thankfully it was again in decline.

Over the course of just under six months, the “Spanish Influenza” had dramatically disrupted the lives of Virginians. Already struggling to deal with the demands of the Great War, Virginia families were faced with fears of contracting the illness, a lack of health care professionals and traditional alcohol-based remedies, and the forced closure of their community institutions. Although it only lasted a few months, the impacts of the influenza outbreak were lasting and today both national and international health organizations work to identify influenza strains and reduce their spread around the globe.

⁷ Davis, Westmoreland. Executive Papers, 1918-1922. “Influenza” Box 14. Library of Virginia.