

By Elizabeth Weeks / Grafton Historical Society

Grafton News article, written for the 100th anniversary.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Influenza pandemic that spread across the world in 1918. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 50 million people worldwide succumbed to this disease, 675,000 deaths occurring in the United States. The residents of Grafton were not immune from this pandemic. In 1918, the town lost 64 residents to influenza in a matter of a few months. Deaths were unusually high in people aged 20 to 40 years old. It is estimated that flu killed 5 percent of the world's population.

The pandemic occurred during World War I. In the United States, the first known case of the flu was detected at Camp Funston in Fort Riley, Kansas. Recruits were being trained before being sent to Europe. On March 11, 1918, Private Albert Gitchell came down with symptoms that appeared to be a bad cold. Within hours, more soldiers had the same symptoms and were isolated. The flu spread quickly and within five weeks, 1,127 soldiers at Fort Riley were stricken of whom 46 died.

More reports of the disease were noted in other military camps. Soldiers heading overseas soon spread the disease in Europe. The flu is also known as the Spanish Flu because Spain was the first country that publicly announced it as an epidemic.

Infected people exhibited fever, fatigue and headache. Patients coughed with such force that often blood was emitted from their mouth or nose. Many victims developed pneumonia which was often fatal. The flu struck so suddenly that many victims died within hours of having symptoms. In some cities, people were ordered to wear masks to prevent the spread of the flu. Many schools and theaters were closed. Coughing and spitting in public was forbidden.

The Spanish Flu developed in three waves. The first appeared at the beginning of May 1918. By the end of July, it seemed to be dying out. However, the second wave began in late August 1918. This wave was more contagious and deadly. The second wave emerged from Camp Devens training camp in Ayer, Massachusetts. A doctor stationed at Devens wrote these words in a letter to a fellow physician: " One can stand it to see one, two or twenty men die, but to see these poor devils dropping like flies sort of gets on your nerves. We have been averaging about 100 deaths per day."

It was here that Joseph Sampson, 24, a soldier from South Grafton, died of the disease at the Base Hospital on Sept. 29, 1918. Sampson Square, at the junction of Elmwood Street and Main Street in South Grafton and Sampson Street, are named after him.

Several other Grafton soldiers perished from the flu. Franklin Sumner Clark died on Sept. 10, 1918, at the Naval Hospital in Chelsea. Louis Hitchings died on Jan. 6, 1919 at Camp Jackson, South Carolina and Frank Sweeney died on July 2, 1918, at the age of 19. William Larmour, 27, died in France of the flu on Dec. 13, 1918.