

# The 1918 'Rockbridge Flu': RHS Looks Back

~ Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society  
for *The News-Gazette*, Lexington, VA (April 8, 2020)

This local retrospective on Rockbridge experiences with the 'Great Flu Pandemic of 1918,' written by Rockbridge Historical Society Executive Director, Eric Wilson, draws importantly on a 2005 RHS presentation by microbiologist and immunologist Dr. Eileen Hinks (who teaches at VMI and Mary Baldwin University). Her article can be accessed, in full, through the RHS website at [RockbridgeHistory.org](http://RockbridgeHistory.org)

Written during the closures of the Coronavirus epidemic, Wilson also signals the public purpose and utility of resources like these, in the present moment, and digitally beyond: "In a time when museums and other cultural events have been indefinitely closed, this overview hopes to direct you to an accessible range of digital resources: in Rockbridge and regionally; statewide and nationally. Through increasingly sophisticated, interactive media, these portals open diverse paths to advance historical curiosities, in and beyond the past and contemporary crises we highlight here. Collectively, we're working to frontline the many evolving patterns that have shaped our own community, and our world beyond."

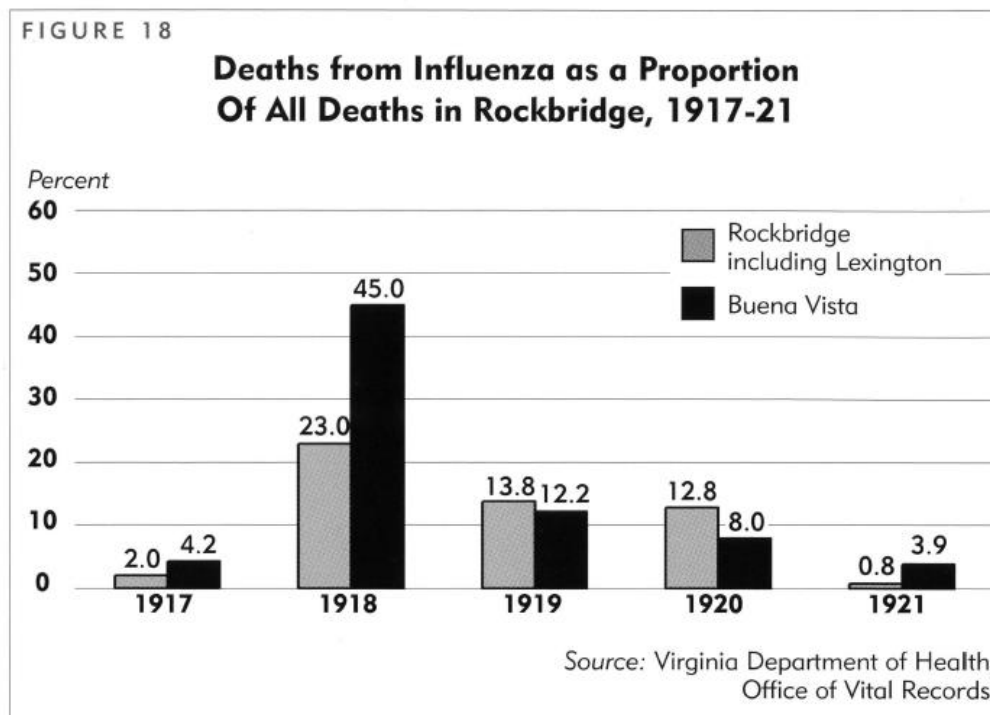
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The third wave hit that February. Holding through March. 1920, a century ago, now.

"Enfluenza" was back. Again. As Rockbridge prepared once more to see what it had seen, too well, before.

This time, the killing return came as the County had just begun to breathe a bit easier. Infections soon revived after a second, deadlier wave of the mis-named "Spanish Flu" had already hammered the area in 1918-1919, and had stalked Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge for a year-and-a-half, off and on.

Patterns had begun to emerge: an unusually high mortality rate in young adults, relative to the expected flu incidence among the elderly and the young. Closing crowded spaces, efforts to quarantine the ill became the new normal. Buena Vista, home to the area's busiest rail depot, was hit especially hard, early on, given its broader geographic connections and crossings.



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Greater Rockbridge had been insulated from the pandemic's first outbreaks, Spring 1918.

But residents had begun casting increasingly anxious eyes, however, towards their local soldiers fighting abroad in World War I, and the many more encamped stateside. Particularly, as worrying reports from Virginia's Camp Lee and others began to come home.

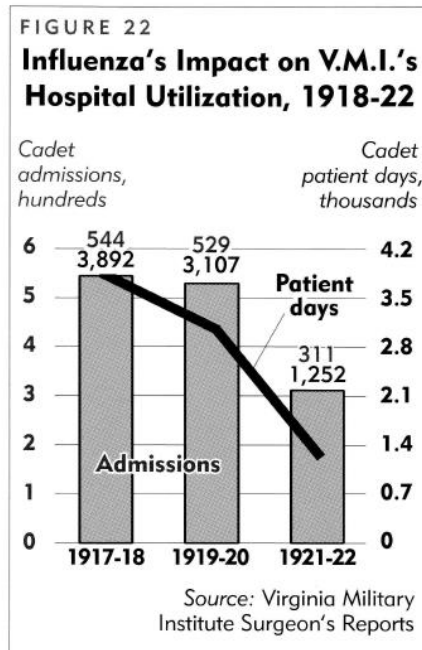


**Soldiers at Camp Lee, near Petersburg, VA, pose for a 1918 photo showing off their arms after being vaccinated. Many Rockbridge soldiers trained at this installation, where more than 5,000 Soldiers were hospitalized and more than 700 died during the two epidemic waves in 1918. This postcard (Photo by Ray Kozakewicz) is from the archives at Fort Lee's U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum.**

But a molecular mutation of that H1N1 virus brought a new, resistant strain that began ravaging the country that August.

The first local crisis landed in late September 1918, as the “enfluenza” or “grippe,” as it was variously called, swept through the young men of Washington & Lee, who were newly returned to campus and their dormitories, and likely carrying the virus here from their homes. Anticipating the current alarm of many civic and health officials, W&L President Henry Lewis Smith remarked: “In the midst of the confusion of the opening, with government cots, blankets, etc. on the way, and with no surgeons yet formally appointed, the ‘Flu’ epidemic arrived with the first registrants and struck the assembled student body with the suddenness of a blow.”

By October 3, Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital, “with its roomy porches, was full to the limit” and crammed with 38 students. Cases were not yet appearing at VMI, with cadets quarantined once the illness spiked on the neighboring campus. That would, of course, tragically change:



Private homes and hotels would soon mobilize as hospitals, with women and men jointly stepping in to help, familiar with the wartime call to service, and self-sacrifice. The local Student Army Training Corps would re-deploy to serve as hospital orderlies, rather than for the World War I combat that the battalion had been preparing for. Just as the November 11 Armistice lay soon ahead, yet unknown, so would the deadly toll here, on the homefront.

Overworked physicians were soon stricken themselves, operating without the sterile protective equipment we now know so important. Dr. O. Hunter McClung and two of his children took sick with the flu. And on Oct. 5, Dr. Reuben Davis became one of Lexington's first fatalities: "taken to his bed with a severe case of grippe, and in a few days pneumonia set in, which developed rapidly and resulted in his death and Dr. McClung attending to patients."

On October 6, the *Rockbridge County News* reported that "for the first time that the oldest inhabitant can remember, not a church bell sounded a call to worship in Lexington." By contrast, a two-week religious revival at St. John's Methodist Church was capped by "more than 300 conversions and reclamations ... every seat in the church was packed, standing room at a premium and hundreds turned away for lack of room, the most remarkable religious service in the history of Buena Vista."

**TO PEOPLE OF THE COUNTY**

Never in the history of the county has there been crape at so many doors or sorrow in so many hearts. As the doors of the church are properly closed the writer respectfully suggests that there be united prayed in every family on the next and every Sabbath day. In addition to our regular Bible reading and prayer that the following Scriptures be read aloud in every home, viz:

2nd Chronicles 7:13-16. Joel. 2:12-18. Psalm 3-51 and Matthew 11:28. I John 2:1.

**FIGURE 4**  
 Source: *Rockbridge County News*,  
 October 24, 1918.

Schools closed for a week. Then a month. Then beyond.

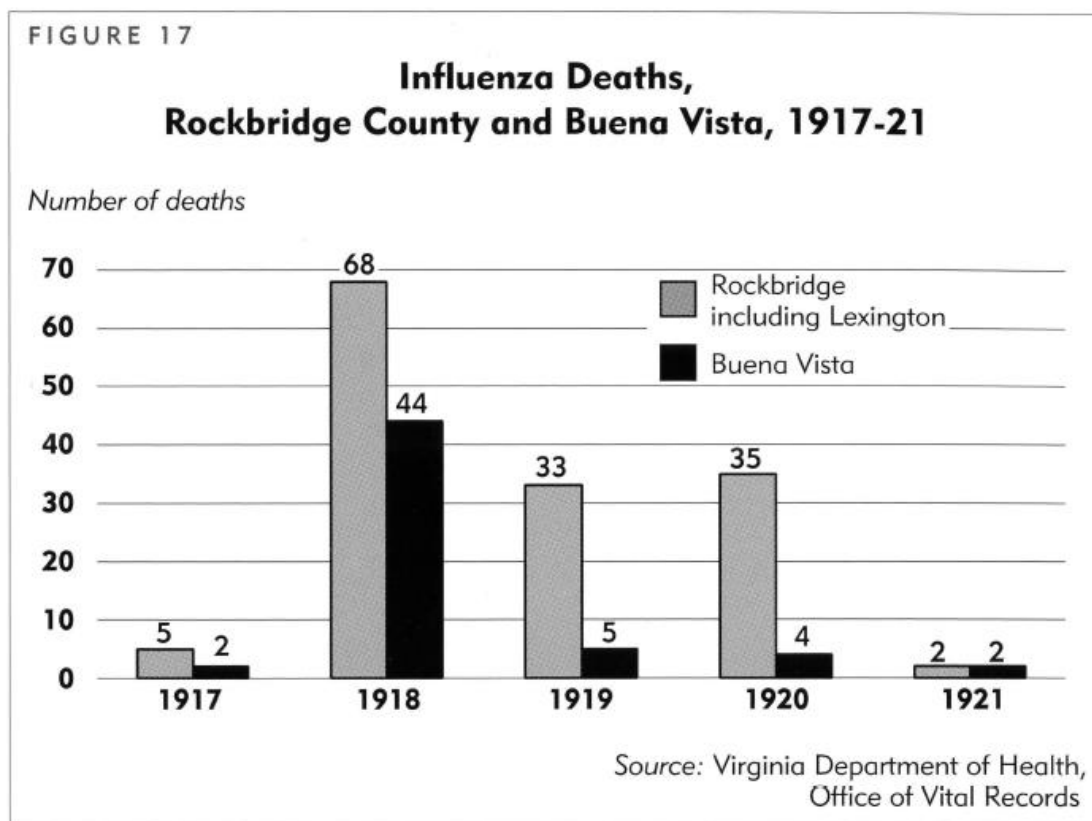
Life's other social pleasures had dimmed, too, as "it was thought by some that congregating at soda fountains should be prohibited, since the crowds thus assembled, were regarded as excellent mediums for the diffusion of the disease." In addition to closing churches and schools, Lexington's Board of Health Officer Dr. Robert Glasgow closed billiard halls and movies at the Lyric Theater. Responding swiftly, he explained that the order "was neither due to the presence of a plague nor a panic in Lexington. It was taken simply as a means of wise precaution in view of the spread of an infectious disease."

With separate health boards, the three local jurisdictions had difficulty coordinating their response, compounded by the lack of an organized public health infrastructure at state and federal levels.

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All this, in just the first few weeks of the spreading pandemic. The punishing chronicle continues for over a year and a half.

In time, according to the Virginia Department of Health and Vital Records, 53 deaths were specifically attributed to Influenza in Buena Vista between 1918-1920 (spiking to nearly 50% of all the city's fatalities in 1918). Lexington and Rockbridge jointly recorded 134 flu deaths in that same span (accounting for 'only' 25% of its total deaths that same first year). By striking contrast, in the flanking years of 1917 and 1921, only 4 and 7 deaths, respectively, were registered to the Flu.



By the Spring of 1920, Buena Vista, Lexington and Rockbridge had fully joined the list of Valley and Virginia communities wracked by this pandemic: "the deadliest disease in human history," infecting 500 million worldwide, and claiming 50 to 100 million lives, according to Historian and Professor of Public Health Dr. John Barry. Find links to Barry's authoritative, best-selling [Book](#), and Video of his [2017 Banner Lecture](#) at The Virginia Museum of History and Culture at [VirginiaHistory.org](http://VirginiaHistory.org).

Like Barry's more global survey, Dr. Eileen Hinks tracks these trials and tragedies through painstaking statistical detail, public communications, and personal reflections. But in further advancing the mission of the Rockbridge Historical Society, her study illuminates those medical, economic, and social experiences in specifically local contexts, and more familiar footprints.

**Insure Against Influenza**  
and  
**Similar Ailments**

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The influenza epidemic seems to be abating, but you should still take every precaution to ward off an attack.

We have all the best solution: for spraying the throat and nostrils, and excellent atomizers with which to apply.

We also sell all of the popular and well known remedies for treating influenza, grip, tonsillitis and similar ailments.

Better heed the old saw about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure and use precautionary methods now.

**WAYLAND'S DRUG STORE**  
Phone 94

FIGURE 5

Source: *Rockbridge County News*,  
November 7, 1918.

While Flu-related photographs are strikingly rare in this part of the Valley, local newspaper advertisements, event updates, and early 'Public Service Announcements' illuminate contemporary understandings and concerns, as the recurrent crises subsided and hit. What sounds familiar here?

*Scriptures to be prayed at Home.*

*Sneezing Etiquette for the Old and Young.*

**HOW TO SAVE YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM INFLUENZA**

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(Advice Offered by the State Board of Health)

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Keep away from crowds.  
Avoid people who are coughing or sneezing.  
Don't put into your mouth fingers, pencils or other things that don't belong there.  
Don't use cup used by others without thoroughly washing it.

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Avoid getting hungry, tired and cold.  
Sleep and work in rooms filled with fresh air, but keep the body warm.  
Eat plenty of simple, nourishing food and avoid alcoholic drinks.

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When you cough or sneeze, cover your nose or mouth with a handkerchief, or turn your face to the floor.  
Wash your hands before eating.  
If you get influenza, go immediately to bed and stay there for several days in order to ward off pneumonia.



Other community cues, looking to rally local audiences through those three, trying years:

*Stores Re-Stocked: New Bargains to Drive Sales!*

*The Lyric Theater: 'Fumigated' & 'Disinfected Daily!!'*

*Coffee Rooms Closed ... but open for Doughnut Deliveries!!!*

Owing to illness Barrington Hall Coffee Rooms will not open until further notice.

Any one desiring doughnuts, cream cake, beaten biscuits, cake, pies and charlotte russe for Saturday can leave orders not later than Friday morning. Orders must be called for Saturday morning. Womans' Exchange open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Pages of the *Lexington Gazette*, *Rockbridge County News*, *Buena Vista Weekly* were stocked with advice, with fears and with hopes, with guidance from local and state governments. Today, these seemingly distant cues invite us to look back at what we still jointly share in our understandings and strategic responses, what we didn't know then, what we've come to know since.

**SAVE YOURSELF**


—FROM INFLUENZA AND—

PNEUMONIA	TUBERCULOSIS	WHOOPING COUGH
BAD COLDS	DIPHTHERIA	MENINGITIS
MEASLES	SCARLET FEVER	MUMPS

**FOLLOW TWO SIMPLE RULES**

**RULE 1**  
Whenever you cough or sneeze, bow your head or put a handkerchief over your mouth and nose.

**RULE 2**  
Don't put in your mouth fingers, pencils, or anything else that does not belong there, nor use a common drinking cup.



USE HANDKERCHIEF WHEN YOU COUGH OR SNEEZE

OR BEND YOUR HEAD TOWARD THE GROUND

**DANGER**

**DON'T** PUT PENCILS OR FINGERS IN YOUR MOUTH

**DON'T** USE COMMON DRINKING CUP

OR COUGH OR SNEEZE INTO THE AIR TOWARDS OTHERS

The Germs of these Diseases are spread through the secretions of the mouth and nose of sick people and carriers.

Furnished by THE VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH  
PLEASE POST - Council of National Defense, C. R. Kelley, Federal Field Secretary

Some, like the advertisement for Isaac Weinberg's Store, Main Street Lexington, reveal haunting reminders of how we never quite know what lies ahead in the turns of history, or understand what we don't fully yet know.



FIGURE 7  
Source: *Lexington Gazette*,  
November 6, 1918.

From our near neighbors to the North, find your way to the rich, continued work of Augusta County Historical Society President Nancy Sorrells: through her recent retrospective on the [1918 Flu in the 'Waynesboro News Virginian'](#) and [WSVA podcast](#), or more thorough review of its area impact in a [2018 Article in the 'ACHS Bulletin.'](#)

To connect with the resources broadly available from our peers and partners beyond: explore: [RockbridgeHistory.org/Partners](http://RockbridgeHistory.org/Partners).



Roanoke's Red Cross volunteers, shown here campaigning to sell Liberty Bonds for the World War I effort, crucially tended to people stricken with the flu during the 1918 pandemic. (Roanoke Main Library)



**Boys wearing pouches with Camphor around their necks: at the time, a preventative recommendation against influenza. [ca.1918, National Archives]**

These are urgent, urging voices from the past, including some well-remembered ancestors. In recent days, and during the RHS Museum’s centennial exhibit on ‘[World War I and Rockbridge](#),’ several descendants have shared stories of their family loss and survival. Evidently, these retrospectives invite communities to reflect, while struggling to come to terms with new terms. Together, we face loss and anxiety, if also spurred by new prospects for collective efforts, social and spiritual affirmations, new communications, indeed.

So this is an especially fitting time for you to pay tribute to your parents’ or grandparents’ memories, memoirs, memorabilia from the 1918-1920 pandemic: communicating with our local historical society, or with those where they once lived.

***Their witness matters. As does yours.***

To spur your range of connections – personal and regional, educational or cultural – use this more sheltered family time to explore new foundations to build on: [RHS Articles Online: 1939-2017](#).

Write to [Director@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:Director@RockbridgeHistory.org) to discuss that legacy, and to add to this vital archive of Local History yourself: whether your interests are centered around this particular event, this era, or others in the 400 year arc of Rockbridge History.

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**See final page for a list of Hotlinks to further cue you to other Contexts from Local, National, Global History**



## ***Re-Visiting the 1918 Flu Pandemic ... in the Age of the Coronavirus***

*Click on Hotlinks to Contexts and Cues from Local, National, Global History*

### **Local and Regional Histories:**

#### **Rockbridge County:**

[“The Great Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919 in Rockbridge County,”](#) Eileen Hinks (2005 RHS Program, in [RHS Proceedings Vol.13](#))  
[“The Rockbridge Flu: RHS Looks Back, a Century Ago,”](#) Eric Wilson, Lexington News-Gazette, April 2020, in [RHS Essays Online](#))  
Doug Harwood, “What Happened when the Spanish Flu Hit Here?” [The Rockbridge Advocate](#) (1994, reprinted April 2020)

#### **Augusta County:**

[“The Flu of 1918: Attack on the Homefront,”](#) Nancy Sorrells and Caitlyn Alexander, [Augusta County Historical Society Bulletin](#)  
[“History Provides Sobering Reminder of Area’s Last Pandemic,”](#) Nancy Sorrells, [Waynesboro News-Virginian](#).

#### **Roanoke, Richmond, and American Beyond:**

[“Lessons Learned from Roanoke’s Battle Against the 1918 Flu”](#) Ralph Berrier, [Roanoke Times](#)  
[“Richmond: The American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-19”: A Digital Encyclopedia: 50 Cities & their Stories,](#) Univ. of Michigan  
[“A Once in a Century Pathogen’: The 1918 Pandemic, and the Coronavirus,”](#) Mark Honigsbaum, [New York Review of Books](#)  
[“Journal of the Plague Year: How the Horrific Flu of 1918 Spread Across America,”](#) John Barry, [Smithsonian.com](#)

### **Audiovisual Media on the 1918 Influenza and Epidemics:**

[1918 Flu Epidemic: The Deadly Plague: A Historical Documentary](#)

(remarkable montage of rare photographs, 40 mins)

[The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Epidemic in History](#)

(Video Lecture by John Barry, Virginia Museum of History and Culture, 60 mins)

[“We Heard the Bells: The 1918 Influenza”](#)

(Documentary by U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, with oral and tribal histories, 60 min)

[1918 Flu Pandemic in Staunton and Augusta County](#)

(WSVA Podcast with Nancy Sorrells)

### **Acclaimed Books on Epidemics, and the Shaping of History:**

[Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918 and How it Changed the World,](#) Laura Spinney

[The Great Influenza: The Deadliest Disease in History,](#) John Barry

[Pox Americana: The Great American Smallpox Epidemic, 1775-1782,](#) Elizabeth Fenn

[In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death & the World it Made,](#) Norman Cantor

[The Ghost Map: London’s Terrifying Cholera Epidemic & How it Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World,](#) Steven Johnson

[And the Band Played On: People, Politics, and the AIDS Epidemic,](#) Randy Shilts