



Boothbay Region Historical Society News

March 2020

Researching and preserving our history

It will not be forgotten

Photograph: Barter's Island class in the 1950s

From Our Archives



Mackerel fleet shelters in Boothbay Harbor

The Flu Epidemic of 1918

by Barbara Rumsey

(first published in the Boothbay Register)

There was no warning in the early September issues of the *Boothbay Register* that the flu epidemic of 1918 was a possible danger to the region. Measles had been a slight problem, but suddenly on Friday, September 20, the paper was full of news of the Spanish influenza. "A wide sweeping epidemic of Spanish influenza, grippe, and colds has been raging in town this week and there have been several serious cases with many more much lighter. St. Andrews is full with the new ambulance called out every few hours." Doctors Gregory and Stevens were unusually busy and several mackerel vessels in the harbor were infected. Schools were closed on Tuesday for a week.

Things deteriorated so fast that by September 21, "The Board of Health printed sanitary practices advisories and ordered that the schools, churches, theatres, lodges, and other public gathering places be closed until further notice." Each week some of the sick were listed, such as Donald Blake and Florence Burnham of Back Narrows. The first death of 27-year-old Ethel Lewis, daughter of Albert and Emma, was listed September 27.

Lester Barter of Sea Street remembers that his father Miles, and his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. George Barter, talked over their wish to go down to the Brockton Fair as they did every year. They

decided to go despite the epidemic. Lester recalled a long street, Pleasant Street, that went west out of Brockton heading to the cemetery below the Douglas Shoe Factory. Twelve-year-old Lester watched big high 18-foot drays (flatbed wagons) go by in a steady procession piled with caskets, four or five high. The September 27 paper reported the Barthers back from their trip to Brockton. Nobody in Lester's family got the flu, but he remembers that a neighbor, Herman Pinkham, had it though not bad.

The epidemic was everywhere. The October 4 paper noted that Howard Carr, a clerk at C. J. Marr's, was drafted but told to wait because the army camps were overwhelmed with the epidemic. Hardie Pierce wrote from in the service that, "By the time I get home everybody will be dead. Every time I get a letter from Sister, it has a death." To escape the flu, summer residents came back to the region or stayed on. Eddie Childs, a motion picture operator from Melrose, returned since all public places were shut; Henry Cook of Brookline came up since the schools were shut; and the Damariscove Coast Guard boys were to have no liberty until "the Spanish influenza scare is over."

Many of the local people who died of flu did so while away. The week of October 4, the only local death was Mrs. Harrie (Grace Carlisle) Smith, age 30. But Mrs. Ralph Holton, 33, died in Massachusetts; Sidney Orne died in the service; East Boothbay's Charles Seavey died in Massachusetts; and Southport's Roland Gray, a 30-year-old machinist, died in Boston.

By October 7 the Board of Health, including Wes Hyde and Benjamin Kelley, opened public buildings and the Harbor schools to those not exposed. However, principals and managers were allowed to order people out at will. The October 11 paper revealed that the opening was premature and clamped back down since the epidemic was "still raging with as much fury as ever." Not all schools in the region were shut; for instance, Southport, East Boothbay, and the Harbor were shut, but Back Narrows was open. Seriously sick the week of October 11: Owen Stover, Frank Tibbetts, J. R. McDougall, Harry Farmer, George Dunton, Walter and Mrs. Dunton, Lawrence Bennett, and Dewey Spofford.

Two Murray brothers died the week of October 11 in Gloucester: Capt. Earl D. Murray, 25, captain of the mackerel steamer *Nirvana*; and Capt. Eugene Murray, 43, captain of the mackerel steamer *Mary Ruth*, "one of a famous family of sea captains." Others who died here were Merrill Burnham, 16; Abbie Brewer (Mrs. Arthur) Kelley, 32; Louise Lewis, 32; and Miss Babb.

By October 18, Mrs. Walter Dunton, 31, died, and while many were very sick—such as Mrs. Ida Jones, Sherb Stevens, Richard Spofford, Mrs. F. C. Littlefield, Capt. Ben Coolen, Bert Orne, Walter Brown, Lewis Perkins, Raymond Farmer, Farley Gray, Louis Carbone, Emery Thompson, Mrs. Russell Holton, and Grace Farmer—many were being released from the hospital. Still the East Boothbay column related that all public gatherings were still prohibited. The paper bragged that Boothbay Harbor was one of the first towns to ban public gatherings.

The week of October 18, the paper printed bulletins and circulars from the state and federal government, giving some background on the epidemic and providing health advisories and information on free masks. The last epidemic had been in 1889 and while the present one was called Spanish influenza, the government knew it did not originate there, but was unsure of its origin.

An excellent September 29, 1997 *New Yorker* article provided information lacking in 1918. (All the following is drawn from that article.) Malcom Gladwell wrote that the first case of the deadly flu was March 4, 1918 at Camp Funston, Kansas. By April most U. S. cities and Europe were infected with the serious, but not disastrous, illness which was carried by waves of troops. It subsided in midsummer, but bounced back as a mutated killer in late summer. The first case of the second wave was August 22 in Brest, a major port for incoming American troops; by the time it reached Spain a few weeks later, it became known as the "Spanish flu." The strain then spread all over the world.

Normally flu killed the very old and very young, but 1918's killed mostly healthy young adults. Mild flus are usually more prevalent than deadly flus because people mildly sick continue interacting with others, while people infected with the worst strains stay home, more isolated. The war and the enforced movement of troops and refugees forced this worst strain of flu around the world; in peacetime that probably would not have happened.

Ducks are the reservoir for flu viruses. Gladwell wrote, "They carry most of the known subtypes of influenza without apparent ill effect and excrete them in their feces, thereby spreading them through land and water to the rest of the animal kingdom." Gladwell theorized that a migrating duck left virus-laden waste in Kansas that was converted into a human-friendly virus. It is thought that ducks can't directly infect humans (though in May 1997 a boy in Hong Kong died of an avian flu virus), so the virus probably combined in another animal, such as a pig. For instance the 1968 Hong Kong flu consisted of seven genes from a human flu virus and one gene from a duck that combined inside a pig. China is now where many of the flus originate since there is a high likelihood of interspecies virus movement because of the number of wild and domestic ducks and farm pigs.

Though the epidemic was called the Spanish influenza, it was American in origin. By mid-October the Boothbay region was only a quarter of the way through the 1918 epidemic.

This is the first of two articles.

For more articles by Barbara Rumsey check our website
www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past

Events



Tuesday, May 19, 4:30 pm

**BRHS Annual Meeting AND
“The History of Sailmaking”
with Nathaniel Wilson**

East Boothbay’s internationally renowned master sailmaker Nathaniel Wilson will kick off Boothbay Region Historical Society’s 2020 Speaker Series with a talk on “The History of Sailmaking” on Thursday, May 18th, at 4:30 pm. Nathaniel Wilson is the guest speaker at our Annual Meeting, which is open to all.

Nathaniel Wilson enlisted in the Coast Guard in the late 1960s and began making sails for the Coast Guard fleet. After his stint in the Coast Guard he went to work for Connecticut’s Mystic Seaport Museum where he learned the craft of making sails using traditional methods, which he enormously enjoyed. In 1975, at a time when most sail lofts were closing up shop, Wilson moved to Maine and started his own traditional sailmaking business in East Boothbay. Using modern materials but with traditional methods, Wilson built a unique business with a worldwide clientele, including the U.S.S. *Constitution*, *Pride of Baltimore*, and the U.S. Coast Guard’s *Eagle*.



Thursday, June 4, 4:30 pm

**“Lincoln and the Abolitionists”
with Fred Kaplan**

“In this elegantly written and thoroughly researched book ... Kaplan presents a more complex Lincoln who “presided over the creation of a new reality that neither he nor anyone could fully embrace, or embrace in a way that would eliminate racial conflict.” (*Publishers Weekly*)

“A fresh look at John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, abolitionism, and other related American history...In this insightful, often disturbing dual biography, he makes a convincing case that Adams, working decades before Lincoln, was the real hero.... eye-opening...” (Kirkus (starred review))

Fred Kaplan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, which was named a Best Book of the Year by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among other publications. His biography of Thomas Carlyle was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. He lives in Maine.



Thursday, October 1, 4:30 pm

**"McDougall & Keefe, Boothbay
Harbor Post Card Photographers"**

Responding to the growing popularity of post cards in the early 1900s, Boothbay Harbor

photographers Frank McDougall and William Keefe produced a large number of real photo post cards of local interest. Between about 1910 and their deaths in 1928, McDougall and Keefe made photographic views of a wide variety of subjects, including street scenes, summer hotels and cottages, and the Schooner Bowdoin. Today these post cards are a treasured visual record of the Boothbay Region of a century ago.

Maine State Historian Earle Shettleworth will share his personal collection of Boothbay Harbor postcards with us in this talk combining early photography with Boothbay history. Earle Shettleworth writes and lectures extensively on Maine history, photography, and architecture.

See you there.

Exhibit News

Bicentennial! Maine became the twenty-third state in 1820.

Who were some of the people living in the region? What landmarks are still here? How has life progressed over the past 200 years? We're especially pleased to be working with local third grade students, who will be illustrating new timelines for our display rooms.



J. Arthur Stevens, a Goudy & Stevens Shipyard founding partner, carved this little "book" for Bess Reed. He used a timber from the Boothbay meetinghouse, built at Boothbay Center in 1765, moved to East Boothbay in 1848 for a shipyard workshop, and torn down in 1943.

On March 15, 1820, Maine became the 23rd state to join the Union. This was not a simple process. Following the War of 1812, many inhabitants of the District of Maine began to agitate for separation from Massachusetts. In 1816, Maine was finally allowed to separate and join the Union – if the majority of inhabitants agreed. However, when it became clear Missouri might enter as a slave state, many Mainers voted against the bill. Following several failed attempts, the majority of voters agreed to separate and a state constitution was written.

As Missouri continued to press for admission as a slave state, the petition for Maine statehood bogged down in the U.S. Congress. Southerners complained that adding Maine as a free-soil state would tip the balance of power. Maine's delegates adamantly voted against Missouri, declaring slavery was immoral and should be abolished. After more wrangling, the Missouri Compromise was signed on March 3, 1820 limiting the spread of slavery to below Missouri's southern border. This unpopular compromise and subsequent amendments eventually led to the Civil War.

The historical society will be celebrating this milestone with several new exhibits highlighting life along the coast during this era. Please join us!

Education News



BRES students at BRHS last spring

You won't want to miss our third-grade Bicentennial history project this season!

We will let you know when their illustrated timelines are up in our display rooms.

For more information on our educational programs [click here](#).

Our Museum Shop

This book isn't for sale.



McCobb Blacksmith Account Book, 1834 to 1837

But we do have a great selection of books and maps
in our Museum Shop!

Just come on by.

Volunteer



Coast Guard Auxilliary, Boothbay Region, World War II

They did!

Love history? We need you. Come help us research, catalog,

plan events, and more. Help preserve the past for future generations.

[Click here](#) for more information.

Or call us! Or stop by and chat with us!

About Us

We preserve your history. It will not be forgotten.

We are open year-round, Thursdays through Saturdays, 10 am to 2 pm.

It's membership time!

Time to renew. Not a member? Time to join!

[Click here](#) for membership information. Your membership helps us research and preserve:



Harbor School students c. 1890

Photographs: More than 15,000 images, including negatives, prints, scans, glass plates, and photographic postcards.

Newspapers: Thirteen feet of local newspapers dating from 1876 to the present.

History files: More than 4,500 items arranged by more than 200 topics.

Family Files: Obituaries, genealogies, correspondence, news clippings pertaining to numerous local families.

Special Collections: Account books, day books, logs, ledgers, diaries, and family albums dating from the 1750s to the mid-1900s.

Document boxes: Discrete, fairly large collections of information on families, businesses, schools, cultural organizations, and similar.

Oral history: Video and audio interviews with area residents.
Maps, surveys, nautical charts, vessel plans.
Yearbooks: Boothbay region high schools, 1934-1992.
Books and periodicals: Town reports, vital records, and valuation records.

Come see us soon! Join us!

Celebrate your cultural heritage

[Follow us on Facebook](#)
[or click here for our website.](#)

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*Come visit! We're open year-round,
Thursday through Saturday, 10 am to 2 pm.*

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